

THE CANDY SHOP WAR



New York Times Bestselling Author of *Fablehaven*

BRANDON MULL

The Candy Shop War

Brandon Mull



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For Sum and Bry—the adventure we hoped to find.

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Summary: When fifth-graders Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon meet the owner of the new candy store in town and are given a magical candy that endows them with super powers, they find that along with its benefits there are also dangerous consequences.

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Table of Contents

[John Dart](#)

[The Blue Falcons](#)

[First Day](#)

[Moon Rocks](#)

[White Fudge](#)

[The Museum](#)

[Trick Candy](#)

[A Grave Assignment](#)

[Unearthing Secrets](#)

[Clean Slate](#)

[Ice Cream Man](#)

[Mirror Mints](#)

[Costly Clues](#)

[Chasing a Ship](#)

[The Library](#)

[A Short-Lived Victory](#)

[The Substitute](#)

[House of Haag](#)

[Blue](#)

[Red](#)

[Yellow](#)

[The Goblet](#)

[New Jobs for John](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Reading Guide](#)

Prologue

John Dart



The airport shuttle squeaked to a stop in the parking lot of Leslie's Diner. The generic building looked like hundreds of other cheap restaurants where you could get breakfast all day. Judging from the outdated exterior and the heavysset man in the window attacking a syrupy waffle, John Dart concluded that most items on the menu, although filling, would taste mass-produced.

The shuttle driver trotted around the front of the van and slid open the door. John stepped down. He wore a weathered overcoat and a brown fedora with a black band. John handed the driver a twenty-dollar tip.

"Thanks. No luggage, right?"

"No luggage."

Had there been bags to carry, John, tall and broad-shouldered, would have seemed a better candidate than the slight Filipino driver.

"Sure you want to be left here?" the driver asked, studying the dim parking lot.

John nodded.

"There's no lodging nearby."

"I like pancakes," John said.

Shrugging, the driver got back into the van and roared out of the parking lot. John had been the last passenger. The driver used his blinker when pulling onto the road, even though the world seemed deserted.

The hour was late. There were not many cars in the lot. A couple of pickups, a gray sedan, a battered minivan, an old Buick, a little hatchback, and an SUV. A man with his hands in the pockets of a faded windbreaker exited the diner and made eye contact with John. He had disheveled hair clumsily parted on one side and the beginnings of a goatee on his chin.

The man sauntered over to the old Buick, which was flecked with rust and marred by numerous nicks and scratches. John joined him, and they shook hands. The man winced slightly at John's crushing grip.

"I set up a room for you in Barcelona six years ago," the man said with a slight Spanish accent.

"I recall," John said. "How are things here?"

The man licked his lips. "A new candy shop opened in town today."

"We may have a regular convention on our hands before long," John said. "You have my supplies?"

"All the things you can't bring on a plane," the man said with a wink. He thrust a key into the trunk's lock and opened it. A dozen straitjackets of varying size were stacked inside, along with a large suitcase. The man opened the suitcase, revealing a variety of weapons: crossbows, knives, brass knuckles, truncheons, slingshots, tranquilizer guns, customized toxins, throwing stars, boomerangs, explosives, and canisters of tear gas. John picked up a heavy crossbow and examined the firing mechanism. The weapon held a pair of quarrels. He replaced the crossbow and pocketed a can of Mace.

"Looks good," John approved.

"The Council wanted me to deliver this as well," the man said, holding out a sizable seashell with vivid markings.

John accepted the shell, blew into it gently, and whispered, “John Dart, in person and in truth.” When the seashell began to vibrate, he held it to his ear. At first John heard a faint whisper, like distant static. The sound progressively became more like waves heaving against a sandy shore. The deep call of a foghorn added to the sea sounds, along with the cry of gulls, and then a voice began speaking. The man who had handed John the shell strolled away to a respectful distance.

“John, we’re grateful you were able to arrive so promptly,” said a dignified masculine voice. John recognized it as his mentor’s. “We trust that Fernando has provided you with the pertinent equipment. Samson Wells has joined the other two magicians in Colson. We now feel certain that the secret has been revealed. We must proceed under the assumption that all three are aware of what has been hidden in town, and are in pursuit of the prize. As you know, we cannot afford to allow any of our order to lay hands on it. The consequences would be catastrophic to our common interests.

“All three magicians involved have neglected warnings from the Council, so the hour for enforcing our mandate has arrived. You are hereby authorized to drive our greedy associates from the area by any necessary means.”

John shuffled his feet. He was seldom authorized to confront a magician directly. Such action could provoke serious retaliation.

“Samson arrived in town only this afternoon,” the voice in the shell continued. “He is spending the night at an abandoned quarry. You’ll never get a better chance to catch him off guard. He may be the least experienced of the three, and strategically the least important, but apprehending him outside of a permanent lair is an advantage we cannot ignore. He will have apprentices with him. Do not underestimate his abilities. Do not enter his lair, temporary or not. Use every available precaution. Once you subdue Samson, start working on the other two.

“We cannot stress enough the crucial nature of this assignment. Success is the only option, at any cost. Work swiftly. If the secret continues to spread, nothing will stop Colson from being overrun. Mozag, signing off.”

“I’d better get over my jet lag quick,” John muttered. He raised the beautiful seashell high and smashed it down against the asphalt.

Fernando approached, shaking his head. "I don't envy your job." Kicking aside some shell fragments with his foot, he handed John a map. Leslie's Diner stood at the intersection of Perry Avenue and Tower Road. From that point on the map, a red marker had traced a path to a quarry not far outside of town. "Quiet place for so many weapons," Fernando sighed.

John took out a tin of Altoids and popped several into his mouth, savoring the piquant tang. "Shame," John said. "Colson isn't their kind of town. Not big enough to get lost in the crowd. Not small enough for true isolation."

"I don't need a shell to tell me something big is going on."

John gave a slight nod. "Too bad Colson wasn't built elsewhere." He offered Fernando an Altoid.

"No thanks," he said. "Unless you're hinting that I need one."

John put the tin away.

"I suppose this is where I take my leave," Fernando said, handing John the keys to the car. "I noticed that my payment is already in my account."

"You have a good reputation. Where are you off to now?"

"A job in Cordoba."

"Argentina? Good beef down there, if you know where to look."

"I usually know where to look."

"That's why you make the big bucks," John quipped.

"Something like that. Tonight's chore should go well if you approach your target discreetly. Keep to the shadows."

"I always do," John said.

Fernando paused. "I hope you never come after me," he said. "Just send me a postcard and I'll turn myself in."

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do they ever see you coming?”

“Rarely. Colson may be different. They’ll be on the lookout after tonight.”

“Happy hunting,” Fernando said with a two-fingered salute. “Watch your back.”

“Watch yours.”

Fernando climbed into the gray sedan and drove out of the parking lot. John entered the Buick, relieved as he cranked it up that the engine sounded healthier than the weathered exterior had led him to expect.

John followed the route on the map until he reached the outskirts of town, where buildings became scarce. Ridgeline Way wound around the shoulder of a hill, and his destination drew near. An abandoned quarry. Why was his work always taking him to abandoned quarries and deserted mines and seedy inner city bars? He needed a new occupation, a job that would entail extended visits to lazy tropical beaches and quaint woodland cottages.

Just over a mile from his destination, John pulled the Buick onto the shoulder of the road. If his targets were keeping a sharp lookout, they might have noticed the car heading up the road and seen the headlights go dark. Not probable, but he preferred to be ready for all contingencies.

Getting out of the car, John rummaged through the trunk, selecting gear. Handcuffs. Tear gas. A tranquilizer gun. A vial of neurotoxin. Four straitjackets. Among other things.

Taking a final peek at the map, John set off up the street. Another lonely road in the middle of the night. Not unsettling, except that it felt so familiar. Alone in the dark, he was at home.

His eyes adjusted until the moonlight seemed bright. The upkeep on the road was poor. Too many potholes. He reached an intersection where a dirt road branched out from Ridgeline. John stepped off the asphalt and paralleled the dirt road, treading silently through the brush, choosing a circuitous route in order to

keep himself concealed.

After walking for several minutes, John peered into the quarry. Industry had transformed the side of the hill into a stony amphitheater. Below the chiseled cliffs sat a dilapidated school bus. John might have assumed it was derelict had he not known that Samson Wells had come to town earlier that evening. The rundown bus made for a shabby lair, but a lair nonetheless. Only a fool willingly entered the lair of a magician. But this lair was temporary—the defenses were limited. John would flush him out.

The guards posed a problem. Not unexpected, but still troublesome. John crept along the edge of the quarry until he ascertained that two guards stood watch, one at either end of the bus.

He would have to subdue them delicately. A sloppy attack would not suffice. John could not afford to seriously harm the guards, the consequence of an unusual condition he had dealt with for decades.

Due to a powerful curse placed on him years ago, John himself suffered any direct injury he inflicted on another. If he broke someone's leg, his leg broke. If he knocked someone out, he went to sleep. If he killed a person, he would die. So finesse was always required.

One guard was tall and stocky, his face lightly pockmarked, his brown hair tied back in a ponytail. He held a wooden baseball bat. The other was a Vietnamese woman—young, short, and slim. No visible weapons. John had met Samson Wells once, and was generally familiar with his reputation, but had no idea what abilities these two apprentices might possess.

Ideally he would avoid finding out. Their positions at opposite ends of the bus kept them out of view from one another. If he disposed of one of them silently, he might overcome both without a fight.

The guy with the ponytail looked drowsy, so John opted to start with him. The school bus had come in along the dirt road and parked in a flat spot near the center of the old quarry. Boulders and rubble surrounded the bus on all sides, providing just enough cover for a stealthy approach. Staying low, moving when the man with the ponytail was looking in the wrong direction, John crept forward.

In some ways, the scarcity of decent cover was an advantage. To a less trained eye, the man with the ponytail appeared unassailable. John doubted whether his target could envision somebody successfully getting close.

John took his time, picking his moments, waiting to advance until a cloud dimmed the moonlight or the unsuspecting guard diverted his focus to pick at a hangnail. When John moved, he stayed low and silent, sometimes gliding quickly over the rocky terrain, sometimes inching forward with supreme patience. Eventually John crouched behind a meager rock pile less than fifteen feet from the man with the bat. It was the last decent piece of cover between himself and his target.

Picking up a pebble, John dropped it gently on a larger stone. The resultant sound was faint but suspicious. He heard the man approaching the rock pile, not with any urgency, just strolling over to take a closer look at what might have caused the unnatural click.

As the man came around the low rock pile to glance at the far side, John slunk in a crouch, keeping the rocks between them. Stepping quickly, John looped around and got behind the long-haired guard, who was only an inch or two shorter than John.

In one hand, John held a strip of duct tape. The adhesive side was extra sticky, and the opposite side was extra slick. From behind, John slapped the duct tape over the guard's mouth with one hand while wrenching the baseball bat from his grasp with the other.

The startled guard whirled as John set the bat down. Making a low humming sound, the guard swung a fist at John, who intercepted the punch expertly and locked the man's arm into a painful hold. Moving decisively, John grabbed the guard's other arm and handcuffed his wrists together behind his back.

A third arm grew out of the center of the guard's back and seized John by the throat. A fourth arm sprouted and tore away the remains of the guard's flimsy T-shirt, then started trying to peel away the duct tape covering his mouth. The arms that were cuffed together fell to the rocky ground and a fresh pair of arms took their place.

With a chopping motion, John broke the guard's hold on his throat and backed away. Shirtless, the guard now had six arms, two of which were clawing at the duct tape. The other four were clenched into fists.

John had not fought a Shedder in years. You didn't see many these days. They could sprout and detach limbs at will, which made them almost impossible to grapple with.

Before John could regain his composure, he heard a whooshing sound. As he turned to look in the direction of the airy noise, a sharp blow to his midsection doubled him over, and a second blow sent him reeling backwards. He only barely managed to keep his feet.

Dazed, nose bleeding, John saw the Vietnamese woman appear. She was obviously a Blur, capable of moving at tremendous speed for short periods of time, but requiring rest in between her bursts of superhuman velocity. With a Blur and a Shedder standing ready to fight, John knew that he was now in serious danger. Hand-to-hand combat was out of the question.

The Shedder lunged toward the fallen bat. John produced a crossbow from inside his overcoat. He did not mean to use it. The firing mechanism on the crossbow had a pair of safeguards, making it difficult to fire unless you knew the trick. As expected, the instant he produced the weapon, the Vietnamese woman streaked toward him and yanked it from his grasp. John lashed out with one leg along the path he expected her to take, and she collided with his shin. He spun to the ground, and she tumbled into the rock pile, dropping the crossbow.

The Shedder picked up the baseball bat while John pulled out a sleek pistol. John was frowning. He had hoped to avoid doing this the hard way. The darts in the gun were full of a sinister neurotoxin manufactured by his employer. For nearly an hour after the toxin was administered, any muscle contraction would cause a burst of excruciating pain, making movement intolerable.

As the Shedder charged with the bat raised, John tagged him in the chest with a dart. Rolling behind the rock pile as the bat swung, John put a dart into the young Vietnamese woman before she could recover. Muffled by the duct tape, the Shedder was trying to scream. John's employers knew their business. The effect of the neurotoxin was nearly instantaneous. The woman cried out as well.

“Hold still,” John demanded, staying low, pain searing his jaw as he spoke. “Only movement will hurt. I want to hear you drop that bat.”

Instead he heard more stifled screaming and the sound of a body slapping down against the rocks. The Shedder had tried to keep moving despite the pain, and had passed out. John had never met anyone who could endure that much pain and remain conscious. Anyone besides himself.

The toxin was one of John’s most effective ways to subdue enemies. The pain kept his targets immobile or knocked them unconscious. And since the unconsciousness resulted from movements the targets chose to make, it did not affect John.

But when *he* moved, John felt pain just as sharply as they did. Muscles protesting in dizzying agony, he walked around the rock pile and retrieved the fallen bat. He had learned to cope with pain through countless injuries, most of them sustained vicariously. Over the years, he had gained the capacity to tolerate just about anything.

The Vietnamese woman glared at him, caged by the prospect of unendurable agony. Her eyes blinked, tears pooling in them.

“Even hurts to blink,” John said. “Sometimes life is unfair.”

John walked around the side of the school bus. All remained dark inside. Teeth grinding together against the anguish in his muscles, John hurled the wooden bat through one of the windows. “Why not come out, Samson?”

“That you, John?” a voice called from inside.

“You know it is,” John said. “And you know you’re cornered. A temporary lair is not going to cut it.”

“Come in and get me.”

John removed a canister of tear gas from his coat, opened it, and tossed it through the window. When his eyes began to sting, he knew that Samson had no emergency gas mask stashed away in there. Tears streamed down John’s cheeks, and he coughed uncontrollably, the spasms triggering waves of agony

throughout his body.

Samson stumbled out of the front door of the bus followed by a cloud of caustic fumes. He held a bedspread to his face, which John tore from his grasp. Samson was a thin, veiny man with his head shaved and several tattoos on his bony arms. Blinking away tears, nauseous with pain, John roughly strapped Samson into a straitjacket.

“Why are you doing this, John?” Samson gasped. “Don’t you already have enough enemies?”

“You shouldn’t have come here,” John said. “You forced my hand. You should have known something like this would happen.” John wrapped Samson in the bedspread, lashing it to him with thin, strong cords.

“I should have known some callous lackey for a despicable group of schemers would drag me from my home in the middle of the night?” Although he failed to muster much spittle, Samson spat at John. “How do you live with yourself?”

“One day at a time.” John tightened the cords.

“You’re not the only guy who knows I’m in town,” Samson wheezed. “The other magicians have no great love for me, but they won’t be pleased to learn about this.”

“Maybe they’ll take the hint.”

Samson cackled and coughed. “They don’t run, John. Me, maybe. Them? No way. You ought to be the one running.” He struggled inside of the bedspread burrito.

“Thanks for the concern. Don’t give me any trouble. I’m already in a lot of pain. I’d gladly suffer a bit more.”

Samson grinned. He had two gold teeth. “I know the limits of what you can do to me.”

“Right. Which is why I’ll have a courier deliver you and your sideshow sidekicks to my employers.”

Samson paled. “I’ll give you ten times the money they’re paying you—”

John chuckled.

“Fifty times,” he pleaded.

“Friend, you made your bed, I’m just tucking you in.”

The Blue Falcons



Nate sat at the end of a sheetless mattress, bouncing a small rubber ball off the bare wall, keeping count of how many consecutive times he caught it. The ball got away from him and rolled toward the open, empty closet, coming to rest against the base of a cardboard box.

His new room was a little bigger than the old one, but felt unfamiliar and impersonal. Once the boxes were unpacked it would look a lot better.

His mom entered carrying another box with his name printed in blue marker. “You’re not getting much done,” she said.

“I don’t know where to start,” Nate replied.

“Just do this one,” she said, setting the box at the foot of his bed. “After you finish you can go play outside.”

“Play what? Robinson Crusoe?”

“I just saw some kids your age riding bikes.”

“They’re probably idiots.”

“Now, don’t have that attitude,” she sighed. “Since when did you become shy?”

“I don’t want to start all over again in a new place. I miss my old friends.”

“Nate, we’re here, and we’re not leaving. If you make some friends in the neighborhood before school starts, you’ll have a much better time.”

“I’d have a better time if Tyler moved here.”

His mom used a key to hack through the tape sealing the box. “That would be nice, but you’ll have to settle for e-mail. Get to work.” She left the room.

Still seated at the end of the mattress, Nate leaned forward and pulled back the cardboard flaps. The box contained a bunch of his old trophies cocooned in newspaper. He had a lot of trophies for a ten-year-old, having played four years of soccer and three of Little League.

He unwrapped the biggest trophy, earned last year by his first-place soccer team, the Hornets. He had been stuck at fullback all season, and had seen less action than ever. The forwards and halfbacks had generally kept the ball at the other end of the field as the team paraded unchallenged to their undefeated season. The coach, a black guy from Brazil whose son was the star forward, had spent the season yelling at Nate to stand up and stop picking grass. As if he couldn’t just hop to his feet on those rare occasions when the ball visited his side of the field. Picking grass was far more entertaining than watching his teammates score goals off in the distance. They should have equipped him with binoculars instead of shin guards.

Soon the trophies were aligned on a shelf, and the newspapers were wadded on the floor. Beneath the trophies, Nate found a bunch of his books, along with a broad assortment of comics. He loaded them into the bookshelf, then heaped the wadded newspapers back inside the box.

He walked out into the hall, weaving around boxes to get to the bathroom and wash the newspaper ink off his palms. There were even boxes in the bathroom. He lived in a warehouse.

Inspiration struck while he was rinsing his hands. If they saved all the boxes, he could construct an awesome fort. He stood at the sink considering the possibilities, staring into the mirror without seeing anything. It would need a drawbridge, and secret passages, and a rope swing. How many stories tall? Where could he get barbed wire? What if the fort ended up bigger than the

house, and his family chose to live there instead? He would have to weatherproof it.

“You all right, Nate?”

He turned to face his dad. “Could I have the boxes when we’re done with them?”

“I’m sure we could spare a few. How come?”

“I want to build a fort.”

“We’ll see.”

“Maybe you can glue milk cartons under it and sail to Hawaii.” This comment came from his older sister, Cheryl, poking her head into the bathroom. She was referring to his failed attempt to assemble a raft out of milk cartons. He had insisted that the family store empty cartons in the garage for months after he had seen a guy on the news piloting a milk-carton barge. Eventually, overwhelmed by the logistics of joining milk cartons to form a seaworthy vessel, he had abandoned the project.

“Maybe you can go polish your braces,” he retorted. “They look rusty.”

His dad stuck out an arm to hold Cheryl back. “None of that,” he said, suppressing a grin. “Nate, why don’t you go outside for a while? I saw some kids playing out there.”

“But I don’t know them.”

“Then go get acquainted. When I was your age, I was friends with whoever happened to be out roaming the neighborhood.”

“Sounds like a good way to get stabbed by a hobo,” Nate grumbled.

“You know what I mean.”

“I guess. Is my bike in the garage?”

“It’s buried in there somewhere. I’ll dig it out for you.”

Summer pedaled furiously up the street on her stupid pink bicycle with the white basket between the handlebars. She could hear Trevor closing in behind her. He always gained a little when they went uphill. At the top of the street, she coasted around the corner, then pumped her legs hard. She would pull farther ahead now that the road was flat, then make the lead embarrassing when they headed back down Monroe.

She rounded the last corner.

“Car!” Trevor screamed from behind her.

She hit her brakes before realizing the warning was a desperate trick. Grunting, she pedaled wildly to recover her lost momentum. Trevor almost pulled alongside her. She glimpsed his front tire out of the corner of her eye. Then it was gone, and she was stretching her lead. A kid standing on a driveway beside a bike watched her race past. The downward slope of the road was working to her advantage. Wind whistled in her ears and made her hair flutter. She passed the mailbox that served as the finish line and coasted to the bottom of the circle.

Glancing back, she saw Trevor reach the mailbox a few seconds behind her. Poor Pigeon had barely passed the kid standing in his driveway. The kid mounted his bike and followed Pigeon down the street. He looked about her age, with reddish-blond hair and a blue T-shirt. His bike looked new.

Summer stood straddling her bike. Trevor and Pigeon pulled up near her, turning to watch the new kid skid to a stop.

“What are you guys doing?” the kid asked Trevor.

“Playing water polo,” Summer said.

“You’re pretty funny,” the kid said. “You should join the circus.”

Trevor and Pigeon laughed. The kid smiled.

“Are you new here?” Trevor asked.

“My family just moved in from Southern California.”

“What area?” Pigeon asked.

“Mission Viejo. Between San Diego and L.A. My name’s Nate.”

“I’m Trevor.”

“Summer.”

“Pigeon.”

“Like the bird?” Nate asked.

“Yep.”

“How come?”

Pigeon shrugged. “Everybody just started calling me that in second grade.” He shot Trevor and Summer a meaningful glance, silently imploring them to keep the rest of the story secret.

“How long have you had that bike?” Summer asked.

“Since Christmas.”

“Have you ridden it before?”

“What do you mean?”

“It looks brand-new.”

“I wash it sometimes. I’ll teach you how if you want.”

Pigeon and Trevor chuckled. Summer glanced down at her dirty bicycle frame, groping for a comeback. She had nothing. “What grade are you in?”

“I’m going into fifth.”

“So are we,” Trevor said.

“What’s the school again?”

“Mt. Diablo,” Pigeon said. “It means Devil’s Mountain.”

“Sounds like a roller coaster. Have you guys always lived here?”

“I moved down here from Redding three years ago,” Trevor said. “Summer and Pidge have always lived in Colson.”

“Where are your houses?”

“I’m right there,” Trevor said, twisting and pointing at the last house on the street. “Pigeon lives on the other side of the circle.”

“And I live across the creek,” Summer said.

The bottom curve of Monroe Circle had no houses. Instead there was a paved jogging path, beyond which a brushy slope descended to a creek lined with trees and shrubs. From where they were standing, Summer could see the roof of her home.

“Do you surf?” Pigeon asked.

Summer rolled her eyes. “Just because he’s from Southern California doesn’t make him a surfer.”

“I tried it once,” Nate said. “I kept wiping out. My uncle surfs a lot. What do you guys do for fun besides ride bikes?”

“We’ve got a club,” Pigeon said.

Summer glared at him.

“What kind of club?” Nate asked.

Pigeon squinted uncertainly at Trevor. “We’re still working on that,” Trevor said.

“We started as a detective agency,” Summer explained. “We sent out flyers, but nobody wanted to hire us, except for Pigeon’s mom who sent us to buy groceries. So we became a treasure-hunting society. We didn’t have much success with that either. Now we’re mainly a trespassing club.”

“Trespassing club?”

“We sneak into places,” Summer said.

“Like where?”

“We broke into a water-processing plant,” Trevor said.

“And a rich guy’s barn,” Pigeon added.

“Do you take stuff?” Nate asked.

“No way!” Summer said. “We don’t harm anything. We just sneak in, check things out, and take off.”

“And keep an eye out for treasure,” Pigeon added.

“That sounds really cool,” Nate said. “How do I join?”

“I don’t know,” Summer said. “We’re pretty selective.”

“Let me guess,” Nate said. “Nobody has ever tried to join.”

“Something like that,” Summer admitted. “We need to figure out the specifics. We can’t just let any random kid become a member. Why don’t you go back to your house for a while and let us talk things over.”

“For how long?” Nate asked.

Summer shrugged. “Come back in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay.”

“Back so soon?” his mom asked when Nate entered the kitchen from the garage. She was loading dishes from a box into the dishwasher.

“Yeah.”

“Did you talk to those kids?”

“They have some club, but they’re not sure if I can join.”

His mom put her hands on her hips. “Do you want me to go talk with them?”

“No!” Nate exclaimed, feeling a surge of genuine alarm. Then he saw that his mom was grinning. She was teasing. “I think they’re trying to make up an initiation.”

“Don’t eat anything unsanitary. What sort of club is it?”

“Mainly bike riding,” Nate said, plopping down in a chair at the kitchen table. He pushed aside a box and began flicking a quarter to spin it, periodically checking the digital clock on the microwave.

“Are the kids nice?” his mom asked, closing the dishwasher.

“I guess. One is called Pigeon. He seems like a wuss. There’s also a kid named Trevor who seems all right, and a girl named Summer who’s a real comedian.”

“Don’t tell me she was giving you competition.” His mom pressed a couple of buttons and started the dishwasher. “So why are you in here?”

“They said they need time. I’m supposed to go back after I give them a few minutes to decide what I need to do to join.”

“Does the club have a name?”

“I forgot to ask.”

After about ten minutes, Nate rode down the street to the end of the circle where the kids stood by their bikes. Summer had short brown hair and scabs on one knee. Trevor had olive skin, dark hair, and a slim build. And Pigeon was chubby with his hair buzzed short. How could such an obvious doofus be part of a club *he* was having trouble joining?

“You still want to join?” Summer asked.

“What are you guys called?”

“The Blue Falcons,” Summer said.

“Come on, that sounds like a soccer team.”

“You want in or not?”

“I guess.”

“Follow us.”

They hopped the curb and rode a short distance down the jogging path, stopping at the top of a steep slope covered in dry brush. Near the bottom of the slope, just before the ground leveled out, a ramp had been constructed. “You have to take that jump going full speed,” Summer said.

“Whatever!” Nate exclaimed. “I’m not a stunt man. What are you planning to do, rob my corpse?”

“I’ve done it,” Summer said. “We need to know you’re serious about joining. If you do the jump, we’ll believe you.”

“You just want a free show at my expense. That has got to be the most rickety ramp I’ve ever seen!”

“The ramp is fine,” Summer assured him. “It’s wood propped up on bricks. And I jump it just for fun.”

Nate rolled his eyes. “Sure you do.”

“She’s done it more than once,” Trevor said.

“And I’m supposed to believe Pigeon jumped it?”

“He doesn’t need to,” Summer said. “He got in on the ground floor.”

“Lucky for the ramp. Fine. You say you jump it for fun, go ahead and do it again so I can see. If you land it, I’ll do it too.”

They all looked at Summer. She pressed her lips together. “Okay. But if I do it and you wimp out, you’re never in our club.”

“Deal.”

She turned her bike to face downhill. Showing no hesitation, Summer started pedaling. Nate frowned. He had dug himself into a serious hole. If he wussed out after a girl did the jump on her goofy pink bike, he would look like the biggest chicken in the world.

She gained speed, approaching the ramp in a rush as her bicycle rattled over the uneven terrain. Just before the ramp, her front wheel jagged sharply to the left, and the bike flipped over, catapulting her into an awkward flight. Summer tumbled through the brush until she came to a rest beside the splintery ramp.

Dropping their bikes, the boys dashed down the hill. Nate and Trevor reached Summer together. She stared up at them, flat on her back with her head pointed downhill. Her white shirt was torn and covered in stickers, her face was smudged with dirt, and her elbow was scraped and bleeding. But there were no tears in her brown eyes.

“You okay?” Trevor asked.

“I’m just trying to get a tan.”

“That was a crazy crash!” Trevor gushed. “I wish we had a video camera. You flew like ten feet!”

She sat up, picking at some burrs in her shirt. “It knocked the wind out of me for a minute. I don’t think I broke anything.”

“You never break anything,” Pigeon said.

She looked up at Nate. “Your turn.”

“Well, you didn’t actually go off the—”

Something struck Nate in the back of his head, knocking him forward in a cloud of dust. The thrown object had not come from Trevor, Pigeon, or Summer. He had been facing them with his back to the creek.

Nate heard ecstatic laughter from behind.

“Denny’s in the Nest!” Trevor shouted as a second dirt clod hit the ramp, exploding in a swirl of dust.

“He’s got our ammo!” Pigeon cried.

Nate whirled, swiping at the dirt in his hair and on the back of his neck. Three kids were over near the creek, half hidden by undergrowth. One had black hair and wore a faded army jacket that looked a couple of sizes too large. Another was a thickset kid with curly blond hair. The third had lots of freckles and a round, flat face.

Nate charged the strangers. It was more of an angry impulse than a rational decision. His hands were clenched into fists as he raced through the brush.

The boys looked surprised. They stooped to grab more ammunition. Flat Face chucked a dirt clod that missed to the right. Army Jacket threw one that made Nate duck.

Nate had almost reached them. Only a few bushes separated him from his targets. He planned to crash through the bushes and tackle Army Jacket, who was the tallest. He dimly hoped Trevor was following him into battle.

Suddenly something blasted Nate in the face and he crashed to the ground with dirt in his teeth. He lay there stunned, unsure whether he had temporarily lost consciousness. Surely that had been a rock. No dirt clod would hurt so much. It felt like the side of his mouth had been kicked by a horse.

“Oh, you nailed him, Denny,” a voice said solemnly.

“Come on,” another voice said, suppressing a laugh.

Nate heard twigs snapping as the boys ran away. Of course they were running away. They didn’t want to get arrested for manslaughter.

Nate opened his eyes. Lying on his side, he touched the corner of his mouth and looked at the blood on his fingertips. He tried to spit out the gritty taste of dirt. Maybe the projectile had been a rock inside of a dirt clod.

“Are you okay?” It was Trevor, kneeling at his side.

“I’m not sure. What do I look like?”

“Your lip is bleeding and your cheek got scraped.”

Nate fingered one side of his upper lip. It seemed to be swelling.

Pigeon came and squatted nearby. “You must be crazy.”

“I don’t let people bully me.”

“Well,” Summer said, her torn shirt still full of prickles, “the good news is you can skip the jump. That was way better.”

“Welcome to the club,” Pigeon said.

Chapter Two

First Day



“It isn’t too late,” Nate pleaded. “Just take me back.”

“You need to go,” his mom replied.

“I promise I won’t complain tomorrow.”

“You’ll feel the same way tomorrow. Except worse, because you’ll be much more conspicuous.”

They passed the Presidential Estates sign, leaving the neighborhood as they turned onto Greenway. Nate leaned his forehead against the window.

“With a name like Presidential Estates, shouldn’t they be bigger houses?” Nate observed.

“I like our house.”

“We should at least have a pool. Or some pillars. They should rename the place Typical Neighborhood Estates.”

“I like our kitchen,” his mom persisted.

Nate sighed. He tugged absently at the zipper on his new backpack. They hit a bump, and the window jolted against his head. He sat up. “Come on, Mom, just let me skip today.”

“This is for your own good, Nate. There is no worse day to miss than the first one. Besides, your friend Summer is in your class.”

“I wanted Trevor.”

“You might have Pigeon.”

“Great,” Nate griped. “A girl and a dork. I’ll be the biggest outcast ever.”

They idled at an intersection. A store on the corner had a sign that read *Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe* in old-fashioned lettering.

“How about we get ice cream instead?” Nate proposed.

“Nice try. You don’t hate school. What’s the problem?”

“I’m too used to summer. It’s hard to go back, especially starting over in a new place. I wish I could ease into it, maybe just go for an hour.”

After a few cars passed, they turned onto Main. “The start of a new school year is a transition for everyone,” his mom said. “You’ll fit right in.”

“They all know each other.”

“You’d feel better if you had come to the orientation,” she chided.

“An extra day at school is supposed to make me feel better?”

“Some people like to know where things are.”

“Can’t you home school me?” Nate pleaded.

“You would never do any work.”

“Sounds perfect!”

They were driving along Main through downtown Colson. All along Main Street from Greenway to the hill topped by Mt. Diablo Elementary, the buildings looked like they were trying to belong to the Old West. Most were two stories and made of wood. Some looked like saloons, while others looked like old-

fashioned houses. Plank sidewalks connected the businesses, with periodic barrels doubling as trashcans. There was a general store, a dentist's office, a town museum, a post office, a bar and grill, a craft store, an antique store, and a barbershop with a striped pole out front.

"What time does the Wild West show start?" Nate asked.

"I like this part of town."

"It looks like Frontierland."

"A little bit."

"All they need is a log ride."

"I'm glad it looks different," his mom said. "So much of America looks the same nowadays."

"Because we all live in the same time period."

"Cut it out. You like it too."

Nate shrugged.

Main curved up a slope. They turned onto Oak Grove Avenue and pulled into the Mt. Diablo Elementary parking lot. Kids poured out of cars and buses, heading into the school. Nate studied the crowd. Nobody looked too intimidating. Most of the kids were younger than him.

They reached the curb.

"All right, have a great day," his mom said. "You sure you don't want me to pick you up?"

"Trevor says they always walk home. You sure I can't just start tomorrow?"

"We wouldn't have made it this far if I wasn't."

"Mom, this school is named after the devil. That is not a good sign."

“Somehow I think you’ll survive. Remember, 18-C with a blue door.”

Nate opened his door. The nervous feeling in his stomach reminded him of the butterflies he had experienced before doing a lip sync in his fourth-grade talent show. Had he ever been this intimidated by a first day of school?

He stepped out of the familiar Ford Explorer onto the unfamiliar sidewalk of the unfamiliar school full of unfamiliar kids. He shut the door, waved to his mom, and joined the mass of students flowing into the school.

Covered sidewalks connected the buildings. His mom had explained that his class was in the last building on the left. He wished he had resisted begging to stay home so much. It had really gotten his hopes up for missing the day, which now made him feel even more out of place.

He heard someone crying. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a tiny Asian kid clinging to his mother and bawling. It made Nate feel a little better. At least he wasn’t that pathetic.

He moved along a crowded walkway, tapping his knuckles against a metal rail. The rail protected a grassy area between the buildings. He considered ducking the rail and cutting across the grass, but no other kids were doing it.

Up ahead, Nate identified a familiar face. The kid with black hair who had thrown dirt clods at him. He was not wearing his army jacket. It was already a hot day.

Nate touched the corner of his mouth. After five days, the bruise had faded, but he still had the remnants of a small scab. Nate adjusted how he was walking so that the kid in front of him blocked Army Jacket from view.

He had learned from Summer that the boy with the army jacket was named Kyle. The kid with the flat face was Eric. The blond with the curly hair was Denny. They were all sixth graders this year.

Although Nate had spent the last few days going to the creek and riding around the neighborhood with Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon, he had not run into the irritating trio since they had stoned him. But Trevor had warned him that those guys tried to bully them a lot, both at school and around the neighborhood.

Nobody was looking forward to the bullies thinking they ruled the school as sixth graders.

Nate peeked around the kid in front of him, who looked too old to be wearing a yellow backpack with Woodstock on it. Kyle was no longer in sight.

Summer sat at her desk watching kids file into the room. Her backpack rested on the seat of the desk next to her. Her notebook covered the seat on her opposite side.

“Whose notebook is this?” asked a girl with long brown hair. Summer thought her name was Crystal, but had never spoken to her much.

“I’m saving that seat.”

“And that other one too?”

“I have a couple of friends coming,” Summer said.

As the girl claimed the desk in front of the backpack, Nate came through the door. He was in a green button-down shirt and jeans. He looked a little dazed. Then he made eye contact with Summer, and his face came to life. She waved him over. He looked a little hesitant, and then walked in her direction. She moved her backpack and he sat down.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“Hot today.”

The girl with long brown hair turned around. “Are you her boyfriend?” she asked.

Summer glanced from Crystal to Nate and back. The question made her feel a little awkward. After all, she had saved him a seat.

“No, I’m her fiancé,” Nate said.

“We’ve been promised to each other since birth,” Summer added.

“Our wedding isn’t until March.”

“What’s your name?” Crystal asked Nate.

“Nate.”

“I’m Kiersten.”

That was right. Kiersten, not Crystal. Who was Crystal?

Summer glanced at the door. Her eyes widened. Pigeon had just entered wearing a black leather jacket with shiny zippers and metal studs. It was obviously brand-new.

“Nate, look at the door,” Summer suggested.

“Oh, no. What is he thinking?”

Pigeon saw them and crossed the room. Summer moved her notebook and he took the desk.

“Nice jacket,” she said.

He looked like he was holding back a smile. “Thanks. Remember I said I had a surprise for today?”

“Little hot for a coat, isn’t it, Pidge?” Nate asked.

Summer glared at Nate. Pigeon would receive plenty of teasing today without his friends adding to it.

“This one stays pretty cool,” Pigeon assured him.

“All right, class, we need to begin,” said the portly woman at the front of the room. Summer checked the clock. They still had two minutes before the bell would ring. “Don’t get comfortable in your seats. We will be reseating

alphabetically as we take attendance. Would you all move to the back of the room?”

Summer grabbed her stuff and went to the rear of the room with everyone else. Her last name was *Atler*, so she was the second person seated. The bell rang as she reached her desk. Pigeon was really named Paul Bowen. He ended up two desks behind her.

“Could you just call me Pigeon?” he asked the teacher when she read his name.

“Does your mother call you Pigeon?”

“No.”

“Then to me you are Paul.”

Skylar Douglas sat down next to her. What was Nate’s last name? She couldn’t recall.

Nate was one of the last to sit.

“Nathan Sutter,” the teacher read.

“Here. My mother never calls me Nathan.”

“Is it Nate?”

“She calls me Honeylips.”

The class exploded with laughter. Summer almost fell out of her desk. The teacher frowned. She had deep lines from her nose to the corners of her mouth from too much frowning.

“That was not a good way to start the year, Nathan,” the teacher said.

“Sorry. Mom calls me Nate.”

Nate ended up sitting at the second-to-last desk of the farthest row from Summer, over by the windows. After everyone was seated and accounted for,

with an empty desk left for Charlotte Merrill, the teacher wrote her name in cursive on the chalkboard.

“My name is Miss Doulin,” she said. She underlined the word *Miss*. “Not Mrs. Doulin. Mrs. Doulin is my mother.”

Miss Doulin had to be in her late thirties. She was not a pretty woman. Her hair was shaggy, her lips were thin, and her eyes were too close together. Worse, she seemed to have a sour disposition. Summer doubted whether Miss Doulin would ever have a *Mrs.* in front of her name.

“Some of you may have heard that I don’t allow a lot of horseplay,” Miss Doulin continued. “This is true. You are now in the fifth grade. You are growing up. More will be required of you this year than ever before. You are preparing for junior high, and I promise you no horseplay will be tolerated there.

“This classroom is a place of learning. Without order that will never happen. If you work hard and participate in class discussions, we can have a little fun. For example, I have a trivia question. The first of you to answer correctly will have no homework tonight. But be careful. If you answer incorrectly, you will have extra work.”

She gave the class a meaningful stare. Summer shook her head slightly. It was not a good sign to be talking about homework in the first five minutes of the first day of class.

“Name two men who appear on U.S. currency who were never presidents of the United States.”

The class was silent.

“Currency is money,” Miss Doulin clarified.

Pigeon raised his hand.

“Yes, Paul.”

“Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton.”

“Very good, Paul. Can you tell us where they appear?”

“On the ten-dollar bill and the hundred-dollar bill.”

“Excellent. No homework for you tonight.”

“Can I have a different prize?” Pigeon asked.

“Like what?”

“Could you call me Pigeon?”

She paused. “Fair enough. If you would rather have homework.”

“That’s fine.”

Trevor exited the cafeteria holding a tray with a chicken sandwich, tater tots, applesauce, and a small carton of chocolate milk. The day had gotten really hot. The bright sun made Trevor squint as he scanned the rows of aluminum picnic tables for his friends.

He had watched for Nate in the lunch line. Summer and Pigeon rarely bought lunch, and he had forgotten to ask whether Nate planned to buy. Nate had never showed up.

Finally Trevor saw Summer and Nate. Who was the kid in the leather jacket? He smirked when he realized it was Pigeon. Trevor joined them at the table.

“Is that jacket keeping out the chill?”

Pigeon looked up from his bag of potato chips. “I have to keep it on. I sweated through my shirt.”

“How was class, Trev?” Summer said.

“Mr. Butler seems pretty cool. Is Miss Doulin as bad as everyone says?”

“Worse,” Nate said. “She already threatened me with detention.”

“Nate was being a little too funny,” Summer said.

Trevor ate a tater tot. “I can’t believe you three ended up in the same class and I got left out.”

“I wasn’t sure Pigeon was in our class,” Nate said. “I never knew he was named Paul, so my mom couldn’t check for his name on the list.”

“Pidge already got in good with Miss Doulin,” Summer said.

“I didn’t know he was such a brain,” Nate said.

“I’m not,” Pigeon said. “I just know a lot about the presidents and the Founding Fathers. I have this great book about them. I have all of the presidents memorized.”

“No kidding,” Nate said.

“Did you know that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the same day?”

“No.”

“July 4, 1826. Fifty years to the day after the Declaration of Independence was signed.”

“Weird.”

“They were among the last surviving signers.”

A hand slapped down on Pigeon’s shoulder from behind. “What’s for dessert today?” It was Denny. Eric of the flat features stood at his side.

Pigeon grabbed his brown bag and folded the top down.

“For a second I thought Summer was dating the leader of a biker gang,” Denny said. “Then I realized it was just a geek in disguise.” Denny tried to snatch the bag from Pigeon. When Pigeon refused to let go, the bag ripped. A sandwich in a plastic bag fell out, along with a banana and two individually wrapped cupcakes.

Eric reached for the cupcakes. He got one. Nate, seated on the opposite side of the table, snagged the other.

“Two desserts?” Denny said. “Good idea! One for me, and one for . . . Eric. Maybe that jacket really has made you cooler!”

“Are you actually trying to steal his food?” Nate asked.

“That black eye healed pretty good,” Denny said.

“It hit me in the mouth.”

“How’d it taste?” Denny smiled. Eric chuckled.

Nate threw the cupcake at Denny as hard as he could. Denny ducked, and it flew over a couple of tables into the side of a building.

Denny was no longer smiling. “You’re going to make this year interesting, Dirt Face. These guys quit fighting back at school years ago. See, Kyle’s mom is the head yard duty. We never get busted.”

“Maybe I’ll go talk to the principal,” Nate threatened.

Denny shrugged. “Try it. See what happens to you.”

“Don’t talk to him, Nate,” Pigeon said.

“See, Nate, Pigeon knows the drill,” Denny said. “Just hand over your dessert and save yourself the hassle of getting trashed.”

“Should we have a talk with Dirt Face after school?” Eric asked.

Denny shook his head. “We’ll let it slide today, since we already beat him up before we met him. But now that you know the rules, don’t make us teach you again.”

Trevor wanted to pounce across the table, grab Denny by his curly blond hair, and pound him in the nose. But Denny was a strong kid. Nate looked equally angry and hesitant.

Denny and Eric walked away.

Pigeon started peeling his banana.

“Nice try with the cupcake,” Trevor said to Nate.

“Sorry to waste it,” Nate said.

“Are you kidding?” Pigeon stared at Nate like he was crazy. “I wish I could lose all my desserts that way!”

“Be glad you missed him,” Summer said. “Denny is a psycho. He gets worse all the time. He flunked third grade, so he’s really old enough to be in junior high.”

“He doesn’t bug us too much at school if we do what he says,” Pigeon said.

“And after school?” Nate asked.

“After school it’s more like a game,” Trevor said. “Like a pretend war.”

“Except not always pretend,” Pigeon added. “Sometimes they take things too far.”

“I’ve noticed,” Nate said, touching the scab at the corner of his mouth.

“We’ve tried to fight back a little,” Summer said. “They don’t mind so much down at the creek. But when we try to stand up to them at school, they make life miserable.”

“It works out simpler to let them play their little games at school,” Trevor said. “Doing anything back just encourages them.”

“We’ll see about that,” Nate said, watching the back of that curly blond head.

“I guess I should try bringing three cupcakes,” Pigeon said miserably.

Moon Rocks



Nate, Summer, and Pigeon met Trevor by the gate at the back of the school. From the rear of the playing field, a path zigzagged down a slope to a road that paralleled Main Street. From the gate at the top of the path, Nate could see most of Colson Valley, including his neighborhood on the side of a low hill across the basin.

“How did your day go?” Trevor asked.

“Not bad,” Summer said.

“I’m soaked,” Pigeon confessed. “I can’t stop sweating.”

“I can’t believe we have nine more months of Miss Doulin,” Nate groaned.

They started down the path. Dry brush and thorny weeds covered the slope behind the school, with a few oak trees adding some shade. A squirrel dashed up a trunk.

“I’m parched,” Trevor said.

“Me too,” Pigeon said. “Where’s a drinking fountain when you need one?”

“Have you guys tried that ice cream place?” Nate asked.

“On the corner of Main and Greenway?” Summer asked.

“Yeah, I think. The one on the way home.”

“It’s new,” Trevor said. “I’m not sure it’s open yet.”

“It looked open this morning,” Nate said. “We should check it out.”

“I’m melting,” Pigeon moaned.

“You could get some ice cream,” Nate suggested.

“I only have like thirty cents,” Pigeon said.

“I don’t have money either,” Nate said. “Maybe we could get a free sample. Or at least a glass of water.”

The path behind the school deposited them onto Greenway. The road was one block over from Main. The street had little traffic and was lined with small houses whose low, chain-link fences protected unkempt yards. A few other groups of kids were also walking home along Greenway. Dogs barked from behind some of the fences.

The side streets along Greenway were minor until Main curved and crossed Greenway. The intersection where Main and Greenway met marked the end of where the town continued trying to imitate the Old West. It was also the location of the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe.

When they reached Main Street, Nate noticed that Greenway had stop signs while Main had none. An old man in an orange vest held up a stop sign and walked them across the street.

Not much farther down Greenway on the right was Nate’s neighborhood. But he and the others went to the left side of the street where the ice cream shop stood on the corner. A bell jangled as they pushed through the glass doors and into the pleasantly air-conditioned store.

The floor was a white and black checkerboard. Immaculate tables and chairs with chrome legs filled much of the expansive room, leaving space to access the long, L-shaped counter that protected two shelved walls crammed with candy. Licorice, jawbreakers, caramels, gingersnaps, cookies, marshmallow treats,

peppermint sticks, gumdrops, malt balls, jelly beans, lollypops, chocolate bars, and numberless other sweets burdened the shelves, some sheathed in shiny wrappers, some visible in clear jars. They had entered an extensive and sophisticated library of delicious confections.

Near the door stood a life-sized wooden Indian rendered in skillful detail, down to his pruned face and wrinkled hands. Meticulously painted, he was an ancient chief with a long feathered headdress, trinkets dangling from his neck, a buckskin shirt, moccasins, and a tomahawk in one hand. He looked weary but courageous.

The shop was empty except for an older woman behind the counter dipping an apple in molten caramel. Her hair was pinned up in a gigantic bun the color of cinnamon. She had large green eyes, and though her youth was fading, she had very pleasant features.

“Come in,” she called in a sweet voice, twirling the apple to keep the caramel from dripping before crusting it in crushed nuts. “We’re newly opened. Children are my favorite customers.”

The children crossed the room to where the woman was placing her caramel apple on a sheet of waxed paper. “This place looks expensive,” Nate ventured.

“Candy can carry a hefty price tag,” she agreed. “There are brands of fine European chocolate that cost a hundred dollars for a few ounces. You see, superlative chocolate must be made with the proper care, by the correct process, and from the best cacao beans. No shortcuts. Such supreme attention to quality demands generous recompense. We carry no name brands here. Everything is handmade. But in spite of my rigid insistence on excellence, I try to stock items for every budget. I even keep a jar of penny candy near the register.”

“Candy that costs a penny?” Pigeon exclaimed in hungry disbelief.

“I swap out the penny candy daily,” she continued. “If you don’t like what we have on sale today, you can call again tomorrow.” She motioned at the large jar near the register. Already digging for change in his pocket, Pigeon hurried toward the jar.

“No name brands?” Trevor asked. “No Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups? No Jolly

Ranchers? No Snickers?”

“I have my own brands,” the woman said. “Some from suppliers, many I concoct myself. If you like peanut butter cups, try my Peanut Butter Blast. If you like Jolly Ranchers, try my Sucker Squares. If you like Snickers, try a Riot bar. You may never go back to the brands you know.”

“These are only a penny?” Pigeon asked. He was holding up a smallish pretzel smothered in white and dark chocolate.

“That’s right.”

Pigeon examined the change in his palm. “I’ll take thirty-two, please.”

The woman cocked her head sympathetically. “I neglected to mention, I sell only one penny candy per customer each day. If not, I doubt I could stay in business. But take me up on the offer every day, if you like. You’ll find I never scrimp on quality, even for the least expensive treats.”

“Can I get one for each of my friends?” Pigeon asked.

“Absolutely,” she responded. “One per customer.”

“Four, then,” he said.

“How much is your ice cream?” Summer inquired. She was standing farther along the counter peering at the tubs of ice cream through the glass.

“For kids, a dollar a scoop, whether cup or cone,” she said, taking a nickel from Pigeon in return for a penny and four of the chocolate-drenched pretzels. “Fixings for sundaes are extra, as are shakes and malts.”

“I’m going to bring ice cream money tomorrow,” Summer declared.

The others gathered as Pigeon distributed the pretzels. Nate put the whole thing in his mouth. There was so much chocolate that it overwhelmed the taste of the pretzel, which only served to add a little crunch. The chocolate was richer and creamier than any he had ever sampled. “This is awesome,” he said as he finished chewing. The others agreed with wide eyes.

“How much for another one?” Trevor asked.

“You don’t want to know,” she said. “Tell me a little about yourselves. I have not yet met many children in town.”

“I’m Summer. This is Trevor, Nate, and Pigeon.”

“I’m Mrs. White,” she said. “Pleased to meet you. You’re on your way home from school?”

“Yes,” Pigeon said.

“What grade are you in?”

“Fifth,” Trevor and Summer answered together.

Mrs. White nodded thoughtfully. “Are you good students?”

“Pigeon is probably the best in the school,” Summer said.

“I’m no great brain,” Pigeon said, “but the three of us participate in the gifted program.” He indicated Trevor and Summer.

“I did accelerated learning at my old school,” Nate mentioned.

Mrs. White licked a stray drop of caramel from her knuckle. “What do you children do for fun?”

“We have a club,” Pigeon said, receiving a glare from Summer.

“What sort of club?” Mrs. White asked.

Pigeon looked to Summer. “We explore stuff,” Summer said.

“And ride bikes,” Nate added.

“Explorers?” Mrs. White said musingly. “Do you kids like to daydream?”

“I do,” Trevor said.

“Me too,” Nate echoed.

“I’m always on the lookout for clever, imaginative explorers,” Mrs. White said, glancing at the door of the shop. “I’m familiar with Colson, but only recently arrived in town after a long absence. It is already beginning to feel like home again.”

“I’m new here too,” Nate said. “My family moved here from Southern California.”

“Do you have any other inexpensive candy?” Pigeon asked.

“How much money do you have?” Mrs. White inquired.

“Twenty-eight cents,” he replied.

Mrs. White pressed her lips together. “Hmmm. I’m in the process of hiring help. If you kids want to assist in some chores, I could reward you with treats.”

They all agreed enthusiastically.

Mrs. White walked along the counter, crouched, and arose holding spray bottles and rags. “This is for the windows,” she declared, holding up one spray bottle. Nate accepted it. “This is for the tables,” she said, handing the other bottle to Trevor.

“The tables look pretty clean,” Pigeon observed. Summer jabbed him with her elbow.

“You can never be too tidy,” Mrs. White said. “Wipe everything down and I’d be happy to share some goodies with you.”

Nate and Summer attacked the windows while Trevor and Pigeon tackled the tables. The candy shop had an impressive multitude of tables, and many large windows, not to mention the glass front doors, but they worked quickly, spraying and wiping thoroughly.

Mrs. White busied herself behind the counter. Every so often Nate looked over and caught the older woman pausing in her chores, watching them.

Trevor and Pigeon finished the tables before Nate and Summer had completed the insides of the windows. Trevor and Pigeon added their rags to the window work, dragging chairs to reach the high parts, allowing Nate to concentrate on spraying. A couple of customers came and went while they wiped down the outside of the windows.

By the time they finished, the four of them were tired. They returned the rags and spray bottles to Mrs. White at the counter.

“Excellent work,” Mrs. White cheered. “You four make quite a team.” She placed a small glass of thick yellow fluid topped with whipped cream on the counter. Alongside it she set a tiny brownie. She cut the brownie into four bite-sized quarters and gave each of them a plastic spoon. Pigeon frowned at the miniscule portions. “Go ahead and sample my homemade eggnog and the butterscotch swirl brownie. I’ll give each of you a full-sized version of whichever you like more.”

The smooth, cold eggnog was thick as a milkshake, and creamy beyond description. Nate had never tasted anything like it. The chewy brownie exploded with a harmonious mix of chocolate and butterscotch.

“There’s no way to decide,” Pigeon moaned after sampling both.

“Maybe I should have offered some of my secret candy instead,” Mrs. White sighed in a quiet tone, as if talking to herself.

“Secret candy?” Nate asked, instantly intrigued.

“My goodness,” Mrs. White said. “Forget I mentioned it. I never bring up my secret candy on a first meeting. Which will it be, eggnog or brownie?”

“What kind of secret candy?” Trevor pressed.

Mrs. White stared at them. “I shouldn’t allude to a secret without explaining, I suppose,” she admitted reluctantly. “But I must ask for a rain check on this one. I never discuss my secret candy on a first meeting. Perhaps if you ask me some other time. Tell you what, to make up for my slip, I’ll take away your choice. You may each have a brownie *and* a cup of eggnog!”

“Secret?” Pigeon said cheerily. “Any of you guys hear about a secret? I’m sure I haven’t!”

“Okay,” Nate consented. “But I’m asking again later.”

Mrs. White began setting the treats on the counter.

Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon visited the candy shop every day after school. They worked hard, and Mrs. White rewarded them kindly. On Wednesday, the penny candy was cream puffs with chocolate icing, the chore was refilling the coin-operated gumball machines, and the prize was ice cream sundaes. Thursday they bought jawbreakers for a penny, then washed dishes to earn apple fritters.

It was exactly a week after their original visit to the candy shop when Nate reopened the subject of the secret candy. The four kids were seated at the counter sipping at delicious chocolate malts through sturdy straws. They had recently finished wiping down all the shelves and dusting the wooden Indian. The store was empty except for them and Mrs. White, who was polishing the counter while the kids drank their reward.

“You told us to ask about the secret candy some other time,” Nate reminded Mrs. White without warning. “Has it been long enough?”

Mrs. White stopped wiping. She twisted the rag in her hands. “I was quietly hoping you had forgotten.”

The kids shook their heads.

Mrs. White folded her arms and shook her head. “It is hard to put curiosity back to bed once you awaken it,” she conceded. “Very well. I have a line of extra-special candy that I don’t offer to the general public. The secret candy is far superior to anything on the menu, but is certainly not for everyone.” She eyed each of them in turn. “That said, I pride myself on being a good judge of character, and my instincts tell me you four might appreciate it. But my secret candy must be earned by more than cleaning windows and shelves. Would you four be interested?”

“Of course,” Nate said. The others nodded eagerly.

“Dear me, where do I begin?” Mrs. White asked, smoothing her hands over her frilly apron. She took a calming breath. “Some of my special candy requires extremely odd ingredients. What do you kids know about beetles?”

“There are more species of beetle than any other animal,” Pigeon said.

“Very good,” Mrs. White approved. “Hundreds of thousands of different species, with more being discovered all the time. There is a certain species in this area, I call them dusk bugs, whose eggs I need for a project I am working on.”

Trevor spit a burst of milkshake onto the counter. “You use beetle eggs in your recipes?”

“I know it sounds peculiar,” Mrs. White acknowledged. “The beetle eggs don’t actually end up in any of my food; that would be distasteful. The process for producing my special candy is complicated.”

“So no beetle eggs in this malt,” Pigeon said, poised to take a new sip.

“There are no insect eggs in my food,” Mrs. White reiterated.

“You should use that in your advertising,” Nate suggested, stirring his drink with his straw.

“Where would we find these beetle eggs?” Summer asked.

“There is a trick to it,” Mrs. White said. “If you follow Greenway up past the Presidential Estates, the road ends after a few blocks.”

“Right,” Trevor said, using a napkin from a nearby dispenser to wipe up the mess he had spewed.

“A dirt track continues where Greenway stops, running alongside a brook. One moment.” Mrs. White passed through batwing doors into a back room and returned holding a can of shoe polish, a small leather drawstring pouch, and a pair of glass jars. “As the sun sets, follow the dirt road some distance along the

stream until you see mushrooms growing.” She uncapped the shoe polish can to reveal that it was actually full of a grainy, maroon paste. “Set this on the ground. The odor of the attractant and the time of day should summon a few dusk bugs. Open the pouch and sprinkle some of the contents on the beetles. They will soon burrow into the mushrooms. After the beetles emerge, collect the mushrooms, place them in the jars, and bring them to me tomorrow.”

“You sure it will work?” Nate asked.

“I know it is a strange request,” Mrs. White. “If oddness turns you off, we should forget discussing my special candy. The candy can do astounding things, but all the effects are certainly strange.”

“Strange is okay,” Trevor said.

“Strange is great,” Nate said.

“These old bones make it harder every year for me to gather my required ingredients,” Mrs. White explained. “If you will collect the eggs as I described, I will share some of my special candy with you. I am confident you will find it amazing and well worth the effort.”

“With no bug eggs in it,” Pigeon clarified.

“Correct,” Mrs. White said.

“Can’t hurt to give it a shot,” Summer said. “Can you guys get away?”

“I’ll just pretend it’s a school assignment,” Nate said.

“Good thinking,” Pigeon said. “I’ll have to go home, get my homework done, and eat dinner. We ought to meet up around eight. Will we be able to make it home before dark?”

“If you move swiftly, that should not be a problem,” Mrs. White assured him.

The fat sun balanced on the horizon as Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon left

Greenway and pedaled their bikes along the meandering dirt road. Brushy slopes rose on either side, and trees crowded the trickling stream. Summer occasionally stopped to check along the edge of the stream for mushrooms. On her fourth attempt, she called the others over.

The four of them huddled around a cluster of small beige mushrooms. Pigeon pointed out a second patch of mushrooms not far away. Trevor withdrew the can of shoe polish, uncapped it, and set it on the ground.

“Think any beetles will show up?” Nate asked.

“She acted like she knew what she was talking about,” Summer said.

“I’m sure some crazy people are very sincere,” Pigeon observed.

“This is the only way to really find out,” Trevor said. “If the bugs don’t show, we’ll know she’s a little senile. One of my great aunts was like that. Very nice, but she talked to the people on TV like they were her friends. She’d get dressed up for them to come over, introduce us to them, that sort of thing.”

The last of the sun sank below the horizon, and they waited, watching the maroon paste. Insects clicked and rattled in the brush, but no beetles appeared.

“If this doesn’t work,” Nate said, “maybe we can still bag some mushrooms and get some special candy.”

“No way!” Summer said. “I’m not taking advantage of that sweet old lady.”

Pigeon chucked a pebble into the stream. “Besides, would you really want special candy from a woman with delusions about beetle eggs?”

“Good point,” Trevor said. “How long do we wait?”

“Hold on,” Summer said. “Look who just showed up.”

A shiny black beetle crawled over the lip of the tin and began wallowing in the maroon paste.

“Get out the pouch,” Pigeon said.

As Nate opened the pouch, a second beetle joined the first. By the time he sprinkled the fine gray powder on them, a third beetle had appeared. The sprinkled beetles left the paste and wandered toward the mushrooms, and several more took their place in the open shoe polish can. Nate sprinkled the new beetles. One of the beetles scaled a mushroom and began burrowing into it.

“Would you look at that?” Pigeon breathed. “To tell the truth, I didn’t think there was any chance it would actually happen.”

More beetles entered the shoe polish can, and more sprinkled beetles dug their way into nearby mushrooms. “How many do we need?” Nate asked, pinching powder onto the new arrivals.

“We should be fine with these,” Summer said. “But keep sprinkling the newcomers just in case.”

A few more beetles arrived, stragglers, and Nate powdered them. After no new beetles showed up for several minutes, Trevor picked up the can and put on the lid.

The sunset faded. Finally the first beetle emerged from a mushroom, and Summer placed the fungus in a jar. Soon, more beetles crawled out. Before long the kids had a bunch of mushrooms in each jar.

Stars were becoming visible as Summer zipped one jar into her backpack and Trevor tucked the other into his. The kids pedaled quickly down the dirt road, then onto Greenway. The four of them paused where the jogging path met Greenway, the point where Summer would split off from the rest of them.

“Mission accomplished,” Summer said.

Trevor picked at a peeling sticker on the frame of his bike. “Who would have guessed it would actually work?”

“Which means Mrs. White isn’t crazy,” Nate said. “I wonder what her special candy is like?”

“I can’t wait to find out,” Pigeon exclaimed.

“See you guys tomorrow,” Summer said.

They went their separate ways.

When Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon arrived at the candy shop the next day, Mrs. White stood at the register bagging a box of chocolates for a woman in a large red wig. The woman paid and exited the store.

“Well?” Mrs. White asked. “Was last night a success?”

In answer, Summer unzipped her backpack and held up the jar of mushrooms. Trevor did likewise.

“So many?” Mrs. White asked, sounding delighted. “Follow me into the back.” She lifted a hinged segment of the counter, and the kids followed her through the batwing doors into the rear of the store. Barrels and crates dominated the gloomy room. Shelves loaded with bags and cartons and unnamed ingredients lined the walls. Various delicacies were in development on a trio of sizable worktables. Mrs. White escorted the children to a small, square table in the corner covered by a purple embroidered tablecloth. A microscope rested on the table.

Mrs. White unscrewed the lid of one of the jars and removed a mushroom. She sliced into the bulbous fungus with a scalpel, excising a flap of beige matter. Setting the sample on a slide, she peered into her microscope, adjusting the focus knob.

“Well done!” Mrs. White exclaimed, looking up at them. “You four reaped quite a harvest, better than I expected.”

“I have to admit, we had our doubts about whether it would work,” Pigeon said. “We were all impressed.”

“Any rational person would have entertained some doubts,” Mrs. White said. “What matters is that you trusted me enough to successfully carry out my instructions. I could make good use of helpers like yourselves.” She rummaged beneath the table for a moment and came up with a cylindrical aluminum

container.

“What’s that?” Pigeon asked.

Mrs. White removed the lid of the container. “Most rock candy is nothing more than crystallized sugar,” she began, removing four translucent chunks from the container. “I call these Moon Rocks. They are magical candy. I do not expect you to immediately believe this. But you will after you try them.”

Nate, Summer, and Trevor shared a look expressing their mutual concern that Mrs. White might be a lunatic after all.

“Find a private place,” Mrs. White suggested. “You will not want to be observed. Just suck the candy. Don’t bother spitting it out to save it for later. Once you spit it out, the candy loses all potency. Biting it can be hazardous. Mark my words—if I am to share magic candy with you, for your own safety and for the well-being of others, you must learn to consume it as directed. Any questions?”

“No bug eggs?” Nate asked.

“No bug eggs,” Mrs. White confirmed.

“Are you giving us drugs?” Pigeon asked warily.

Mrs. White stroked his head gently. “Why, of course not. Drugs are a terrible menace! What kind of person would I be to disguise drugs as candy and give them to children? I certainly would not be in business long! But I’m glad you’re on the lookout—there are unsavory characters in the world. This is a candy shop. Some of my candy is very special. Unique in all the world, in fact, and capable of astounding things. Give the Moon Rocks a try. Like the beetles, you’ll find it much easier to believe me after you put my words to the test. Find a quiet place. Suck, don’t bite. Or don’t try them, if you prefer. Now I must get back to minding the store and preparing goodies. Thank you for your help. If you enjoy the candy, please come visit me again.”

Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon each accepted a Moon Rock and let Mrs. White usher them out of the store.

Near the creek below Monroe Circle was a roomy hollow canopied by five trees and sheltered by barriers of prickly undergrowth. There were only two ways in, and both were tricky to see. One required crawling. Four of the trees were quite good for climbing. The largest tree had huge, winding roots that grew out of the steep bank above the creek. The gnarled roots made for a superb emergency hiding place. This secluded hollow was the hideout of the Blue Falcons. They called it the Nest.

Summer crawled into the Nest, followed by Trevor, Pigeon, and Nate. Once inside, they stood in a circle, all still holding the sugar crystals Mrs. White had given them. “Who’s going to try it first?” Nate asked.

“You’re the newest member of the club,” Summer replied.

“So I get to pick? Okay . . . Trevor.”

“I think she meant you should try the candy first,” Trevor clarified.

“What do you think it does?” Pigeon asked.

“Nothing,” Summer said. “But I hope it tastes good.”

“She sounded pretty convinced they were magical,” Pigeon said hopefully. “And she was right about the beetles.”

Trevor held up his Moon Rock, studying it. “I wonder what happens if we bite them?”

“I bet our heads will explode,” said Nate. He looked around the circle; the others were all watching him with expectant looks on their faces. “Okay, I’ll do it first.” He popped the Moon Rock into his mouth.

“Feel any different?” Pigeon asked eagerly.

“A little,” Nate said. “Sort of tingly. It tastes really good. I almost feel . . .”

He moved to take a step and floated up into the air. He rose slowly, his feet reaching the height of Trevor’s eyes before he drifted downward to land gently

on the ground.

“ . . . lighter,” Nate finished, bewildered.

They stared at each other in awed silence.

“They really are magical,” Pigeon finally murmured.

Nate tried a little hop, and this time he glided over Summer’s head, landing softly on the other side of her. He could almost have reached some of the overhanging branches of the trees. “It’s like I’m on the moon,” Nate said. “You know, the way the astronauts look on TV, bouncing around in low gravity.”

“Moon Rocks,” Trevor said. “I want to try.” He stuck his candy into his mouth and jumped hard. He launched up into the limbs of the tree above, catching hold of one to stop his ascent. “Whoa!” he called from his lofty perch. “It felt like I was heading into orbit.”

“I’m not sure *Moon Rocks* is the right name,” Pigeon said, examining his piece of crystallized sugar. “The gravity on the moon is roughly one-sixth that of earth. Which means you could jump six times higher there than you could here. But that branch is more than six times higher than Trevor can jump. And he was still heading up when he caught hold.”

“And you say you’re not a brain?” Nate said.

“I just like books about space,” Pigeon apologized.

“How do I get down?” Trevor asked. “This is freaky.”

“Just drop,” Pigeon said. “Since you jumped up there, it should feel no worse than falling a couple of feet.”

“I don’t know,” Trevor fretted. “What if it stops working? I could break my legs.”

Taking aim, Nate jumped toward the branch Trevor was clutching. He did not jump with everything he had, just a solid leap. He glided up through the air, feeling almost weightless. As he reached the apex of his trajectory, Nate came alongside Trevor and caught hold of the same limb.

“Watch,” Nate said, letting go and floating to the ground, gradually gaining a little speed. He landed just hard enough to make his knees bend a little. Trevor let go of the branch and landed the same way.

“You guys *have* to try this,” Trevor said.

“Maybe we should save ours,” Summer said. “They might come in handy when we’re out on adventures.”

“Mrs. White acted like we could get more,” Pigeon reminded her.

“For how much?” Summer replied. “A billion dollars?”

“Just try it,” Nate urged. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

Summer’s eyes hardened and she stuck the Moon Rock into her mouth. Pigeon did likewise. They both took a few experimental leaps. Pigeon could not stop giggling. Nate and Trevor bounded around as well.

“What if the candy really is drugs?” Pigeon asked. “What if we only think we’re jumping really high because our minds are warped?”

“You saw me jumping high before you tried the Moon Rock,” Nate pointed out.

“Oh, yeah,” Pigeon said.

“Over here,” Summer called. She stood at the brink of the steep bank above the creek. The others loped over to her with long, slow-motion strides. “Who wants to jump it?”

At this point the bank of the creek was more than ten feet high. The far bank was lower, and almost thirty feet away. “Your idea,” Nate said.

“I do everything first,” she complained.

“I tried the candy first,” Nate pointed out.

“Think I could get a running start?” she asked.

“You’d have to back up,” Nate said. “You could take a few steps if you pace yourself.”

“But carefully,” Trevor said. “If you misjudge, you could drift right into the water.”

“If you fall, be careful how you land,” Pigeon warned. “It will only feel like you fell a little ways, but the creekbed is rocky.”

Summer took a pair of long, low strides away from the creek and turned around. Keeping low, she started forward, pushing off tentatively with the first step, then much more forcefully with the second. Landing about four feet shy of the edge, she pushed off with all she had, soaring upward in a smooth, mild arc. She easily cleared the creekbed and had to fend off small branches before catching hold of a tree limb on the far bank. Letting go, she drifted to the ground. “Easy!” she challenged.

Duplicating the strategy Summer had used, Trevor took two steps, but he leapt from the edge more gently and landed ten feet beyond the far bank, stumbling slightly. Nate copied Trevor and landed in almost the same spot.

“I don’t know,” Pigeon said, staring down at the water.

“It’s no sweat, Pidge,” Trevor said.

“I don’t know,” Pigeon repeated.

“Go for it,” Nate said.

“Okay, okay.” Instead of backing up for a running start, Pigeon squatted and sprang, keeping his feet together. He rose very high but had little forward momentum. After he reached the zenith of his flight, his speed lazily increased as he descended toward the center of the shallow creek.

Summer crouched and sprang, moving low and relatively swiftly on a course to intercept Pigeon. They glided past each other, just out of reach. Pigeon hit the water with a splash and ended up on his backside. Summer had not jumped very high, so she hit the side of the far bank. Pushing off from the dirt wall, she

drifted back over the creek to land near Nate. Pigeon spat out his candy and waded out of the creek, his soaked jeans a much darker blue.

“That was cool of you to go after Pigeon,” Nate said to Summer.

“You came close,” Trevor said encouragingly. “I didn’t even think to try.”

“How much of your Moon Rock has dissolved?” Summer asked Nate.

“I still have a good amount,” he said. “Don’t worry, I’m paying attention. I don’t want to run out in midflight.”

Pigeon waddled over to them, pants dripping. “As soon as I spat out the Moon Rock, my weight returned to normal,” Pigeon reported. “I wonder if that means you guys would seem really light to me?” He grabbed Trevor under his arms and hoisted him into the air. “Wow, it feels like you’re made of Styrofoam!” He tossed Trevor, who sailed more than ten feet before landing lightly.

“That’s pretty cool,” Nate said. “See if you can throw me like a football.”

“No!” Summer warned. “Have you ever seen Pigeon throw a ball? No offense, Pidge.”

“None taken,” he said. “She’s right, I’m not very coordinated.”

“Check it out,” Trevor said. “Flying kick.” He jumped into the air and glided over to a tree, lashed out with his leg, and rebounded a dozen feet after striking the trunk.

“Cool,” Nate said. “We should practice jumping sideways off stuff, like Summer did with the bank. Trevor sort of did it with that kick.”

“You shouldn’t have spat out your Moon Rock,” Trevor said to Pigeon.

“It’s okay,” Pigeon said. “You guys bounce around. I need to go change my pants anyhow. Seems like I’m always the one who ends up in the creek!”

White Fudge



Pigeon had plans to sneak in the front door. Since his mom was a homemaker with overprotective tendencies, he didn't want to get caught in wet jeans again.

But his cousin Nile was waiting out front astride his motorcycle. Nile had picked out Pigeon's leather jacket. At seventeen, with his head shaved, he looked a lot better than Pigeon in studded black leather.

"Where were you?" Nile asked. "Taking a swim?"

"I fell in the creek."

"How'd the jacket go over?"

"I sweated like crazy," Pigeon said. "And I got teased. I decided not to wear it today."

"Those same bullies?"

"Mainly."

"You ought to let me handle them," Nile said.

"No way, that'll just make it worse."

"I'll just scare them. I'm not going to rough up sixth graders. I'll threaten to beat up their dads."

“I’ve got it covered,” Pigeon said.

“If you say so,” Nile approved. “Remember, it takes time for a new image to stick. And you can take the jacket off if it gets too hot.”

“Okay.”

Nile revved the engine of his bike. “Say hi to your dad.” He pulled out of the driveway and noisily accelerated up the street.

Pigeon sighed. How could he be so clumsy with a cousin that cool? As Pigeon started up the steps, his mom opened the front door, a short, pudgy woman with thick black hair. She placed a hand over her mouth. “Paul, what happened to your jeans?”

“I fell in the creek,” he said.

“They were brand-new!” she panicked.

“It was just water,” he said.

“Filthy creek water,” she lamented, rushing down the steps to fuss over him. He wished he had a Moon Rock right then so he could fly away. She always made him feel like such a baby. “It may be time to give up playing down there.” He would have been worried, but she always said something like that after he drenched his shoes or got hurt.

“I’m fine. I was playing with my best friends.” That was the right card to play. He had not had any friends until second grade. And it was only last year that his friendship with Summer and Trevor had become cemented. His mom had been worried about him—she was thrilled that he was finally socializing.

“Well, come inside and get cleaned up. You need to be more careful down there. How was your day?”

“Good,” he said, following her inside. “I got another trivia question right. Miss Doulin seems uptight but nothing I can’t handle.”

“Where’s your jacket? You look so sharp in it!”

“I didn’t wear it today. Everybody liked it so much last week. I didn’t want to look like a show-off!”

His mom beamed. Although Nile had selected the jacket, his mom had paid for it. Pigeon hurried up the stairs to his room. He ditched his wet shirt and jeans and put on tan shorts and a T-shirt. He could hear his mom scolding his sister downstairs. He had two younger sisters, ages six and three. They gave his mom people to worry about besides him, for which he was grateful.

Newly dressed, Pigeon slipped out the front door and hurried back to the creek. Upon reaching the jogging path, he noticed a single bubble the size of a baseball hovering near the Nest. It was peculiar, because instead of drifting it maintained an unwavering position about eight feet off the ground. Curious, Pigeon approached it. As he drew near, the bubble lifted higher, floating out of sight behind some trees.

In the Nest, Pigeon found Trevor, Summer, and Nate sitting on the ground. “Pigeon!” Trevor said. “Welcome back!”

“Were you guys blowing bubbles?” Pigeon asked.

“No,” Summer answered. “Why?”

“I saw a bubble floating just outside the Nest. I guess you finished the candy.”

“It lasted pretty long,” Nate said.

“We were just talking about going back to the ice cream shop,” Summer said.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Pigeon said.

“I hope Mrs. White will give us more Moon Rocks now that we believe her,” Trevor said.

“Who knows what other types of candy she might have,” Summer said.

“I wonder why she isn’t world famous,” Nate mused. “If she can make magic candy, she should be a zillionaire.”

“She probably wants to keep it a secret,” Trevor said. “Remember how she told us to try the candy when nobody was around?”

“We’ve finally uncovered a true mystery,” Summer said. “There’s really only one way to find out more about Mrs. White.”

The bell jingled when Nate opened the door. A tall, plain woman was paying for a caramel apple at the register. A pair of teenagers slouched at a table eating ice-cream cones. A male dwarf with spiky blond hair shaved flat on top was balanced on a stool placing candy boxes on a high shelf. Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon entered the store after Nate. Pigeon waited to hold the door as the tall woman exited.

“How can I help you?” the middle-aged dwarf asked, hopping down from the stool and mostly vanishing behind the counter.

“These are friends,” Mrs. White said, raising the hinged countertop. “Mind the shop for a moment, Arnie?”

“You got it,” the dwarf said.

Nate and the others passed behind the counter and into the cluttered back room. “You hired a helper,” Nate said.

“I did,” Mrs. White replied. “And there will be more to come. I take it you tried the Moon Rocks.”

“They were incredible,” Summer raved.

“We seemed to jump a lot higher than we would on the moon,” Pigeon remarked.

“Very observant,” Mrs. White approved. “The Moon Rocks reduce the effect of gravity between ten and twelve times, thus imitating an environment of considerably less than lunar gravity. Did you have fun?”

“It was awesome,” Nate said. “It felt amazing jumping so high. We grabbed

onto tree branches, and hopped over the creek, and we practiced pushing off stuff to leap sideways.”

“I’m so glad it was enjoyable,” Mrs. White said, her smile creating deep dimples in her cheeks.

“I fell in the creek,” Pigeon confessed.

“We were wondering if you might let us try some more,” Trevor said.

“Or some other magic candy,” Summer added.

“What use would a sample be if there were no more candy to be had?” Mrs. White said.

“Do you have lots of different kinds?” Pigeon asked.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Mrs. White said. She lowered her voice, and her demeanor grew more serious. “I have more magic candy, but we must reach an agreement before I can share it with you. As you might imagine, magic candy is most difficult to produce, and my supplies are limited.”

“I knew it,” Nate huffed. “It’s going to cost a fortune.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” Mrs. White chided. “I know I’m dealing with children. I don’t expect you to pay for the candy in cash. Its monetary value far exceeds what even your parents could afford. I am willing to give you the opportunity to earn more candy by performing small services for me. And I expect you to keep the effects of the candy secret. Should you try to tell others what my candy can do, not only will I deny your story, I will never share magic candy with any of you again.” Her voice and expression softened. “I don’t mean to be stern, I just want to impress upon you how earnest I am about this. Can you keep my secret?”

The kids all nodded. “What do we have to do for more candy?” Nate asked.

“Your first task is easy,” Mrs. White said. “Since I’m starting up a new business, I recently whipped up a batch of one of my specialties—white fudge. I want you to distribute free samples to your family and friends. In return, I’ll give

you a bag of Moon Rocks.”

“Can we try the fudge too?” Pigeon asked.

“There is a catch to eating the white fudge,” Mrs. White cautioned. “It tastes absolutely scrumptious. Once you taste one piece, your mouth will water for more. Which is why I give them away to drum up business. But the fudge has some side effects. It dulls the effectiveness of my magic candy. It also makes it difficult for those who eat it to notice the powers my special treats grant to others. So the fudge serves a dual purpose: It will entice your friends and family into my store, so I can remain profitable, and it will help them ignore any oddities resulting from the candy I give you.”

“Will it hurt anybody?” Trevor asked.

“The fudge is harmless,” Mrs. White assured them. “The only reason to avoid my white fudge is if you want magic candy to work on you. After you eat the fudge, sucking on a Moon Rock won’t make you a pound lighter.”

“When will we get the Moon Rocks?” Nate asked.

“Take home my fudge. Share it tonight with your parents, older relatives, and any other friends, and the bag of Moon Rocks, containing at least forty pieces, will be yours tomorrow.” She picked up a white rectangular box with “Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe” stamped in red and opened it. Inside were four large cubes of white fudge.

Pigeon leaned forward to sniff the contents. “Smells good.”

“I’ll give each of you two boxes,” Mrs. White said. “Make sure you emphasize where you got the fudge, and that our shop has many other goodies. And, just in case the temptation is too great, here is some dark fudge for each of you.” She handed each of them a dense square of brown fudge.

Sitting at his desk the next day, Nate could hardly wait for school to end. The clock seemed paralyzed. That morning, he had gotten his name written on the board for cracking jokes. A name on the board was a warning—if he got a check

mark after it, he would have to stay after class, so he had forced himself to keep quiet the rest of the day.

Staying after class was not an option. He was anxious to collect his reward from Mrs. White. The previous night he had shared the white fudge with his family. His dad, mom, and sister each ate a cube. They all loved it, and wondered why he didn't eat the last piece. He explained that he had already had some. His dad ended up splitting the extra block of fudge with his mom. Everyone seemed in an unusually relaxed mood after the fudge. They all sat around watching TV together for the remainder of the evening, which was out of character for his parents.

Earlier that day at lunch, after Pigeon had lost his dessert to Denny, Eric, and Kyle, Nate learned that the others had given fudge to their families as well. Trevor had also presented a box to his neighbors. Nate still had an extra box under his bed.

Miss Doulin paced at the front of the room, droning about homework. Nate was too excited by the thought of gliding through the air again to pay attention. He doodled in his notebook, depicting a stick figure jumping from the half-court line to slam-dunk a basketball. Then he diagrammed how a stick person would leap back and forth between two skyscrapers to reach the top.

Finally, the bell rang. Pigeon went to the front of the room and presented a box of white fudge to Miss Doulin. She smiled and they chatted for a moment. Pigeon had offered a bunch of correct answers in class again today. The guy might not have much athletic ability, but he was certainly a world-class kiss up!

"I saw you giving sweets to your new girlfriend," Nate teased as he and Pigeon walked out of the room.

"She's not my girlfriend," Pigeon said.

"Not yet," Nate said. "But she's not married, she calls you by your nickname, and you're giving her chocolates. Give it time."

"Lay off," Summer said, coming up from behind. "Can't hurt for one of us to get on Miss Doulin's good side."

“It isn’t just getting on her good side,” Nate said. “I bet she writes about Pigeon in her diary.”

“You’re the one who keeps talking about it, Nate,” Summer pointed out. “Maybe you’re the one with the secret crush.”

Nate found himself without a comeback. Fortunately, he saw Trevor walking toward them and jogged over to greet him. “Ready to go for a moonwalk?” Nate asked.

Trevor gave him a high-five. “For sure. Let’s get over to Sweet Tooth.”

The four friends were hurrying toward the ramp at the rear of the school when something stung the back of Nate’s ear. Nate looked over his shoulder and found Denny leering at him. As usual, Eric and Kyle were following right behind. “What’s your problem?” Nate said, turning away from the older boy, trying to ignore him.

Denny flicked his ear again. Nate whirled, angry. He wanted to tear out a handful of that curly blond hair. “Come on,” Denny invited. “Start it.”

Despite Nate’s outrage, a look at Denny’s stocky frame warned him that although this kid was only a year ahead of him in school, he was two or three years ahead of him in growth. If Nate tried to fight him, he would be playing right into his hands. For a moment, Nate considered swinging his backpack like a club. Instead, he just said, “Go find a better hobby.”

“Actually,” Denny said innocently, “I came over because I need a favor. See, I’m supposed to do an oral report about retarded kids, so I was wondering if I could follow you guys around for a few hours. Do a little firsthand research.”

Eric and Kyle burst out laughing.

“Maybe you should interview your mom,” Nate said. “None of us ever flunked a grade.”

The laughing stopped. Nate relished the hurt expression that flashed across Denny’s features. For a moment, Denny seemed to be groping for something to say, then he shoved Nate hard, sending him sprawling onto the grass. Nate

looked up at him, still feeling victorious.

Denny picked up Nate's backpack and chucked it over the fence at the back of the school. The bag tumbled down the weedy hill. "Don't cry, Dirt Face," Denny pouted theatrically, strutting away with Eric and Kyle.

"You really are insane," Summer said as Nate got to his feet.

"You burned him good, though," Trevor said.

"I'm not going to let him push me around," Nate said.

"Looks like he just did," Summer said. "I'm telling you, don't egg him on—it only makes it worse."

As they descended the ramp at the back of the school, Trevor ran off the path and grabbed Nate's bag, rejoining the others at the bottom of the slope, where they set off along Greenway. An old woman with a curly gray hairdo and checkered pants roamed her yard watering weed-choked flowers with a hose. She smiled and waved as they walked by, a beauty-queen wave, hand near her cheek.

They were nearing the intersection of Greenway and Main when a bleary-eyed man in a stained corduroy jacket came running toward them down one of the side streets. "Summer, Trevor, Pidge, Nate! Hold up! You have to listen to me."

The kids turned to face the oncoming stranger. He had lean features, a stubbly beard, and wild hair. "You guys know him?" Nate asked.

"Not by name," Summer said.

"I've noticed him roaming around town lately," Trevor said. "I think he's homeless."

"Stay away from Sweet Tooth," the stranger warned, stumbling slightly. "You can't trust Mrs. White. She's dangerous. You can't trust anyone!" He was still rushing toward them.

"That's close enough," Nate commanded.

The man stopped short. “You have to let me explain. Nate, it’s me. I’m you! I’m from the future!”

“Right,” Nate said. “You don’t look anything like me. How do you know my name?”

“I have no time,” the stranger said. He plunged his fingers into his hair. “What was I thinking? I forgot that you weren’t going to believe me. I guess you guys don’t want to come with me so I can fill you in on some things?”

“Sorry, we’re not going anywhere with you,” Summer said.

“This guy harassing you?” the crossing guard called, approaching from down the street.

“I think he’s drunk,” Pigeon said.

The stranger threw up his hands like he was under arrest. “No problem here, sorry to bother you kids. Keep in mind, robbing graves isn’t right. I have things to do.”

The man sprinted away from them down Greenway, swerving unsteadily. “What a nutcase,” Trevor muttered.

“Out of his mind,” Nate agreed.

“What do you think he has against Mrs. White?” Summer wondered.

“He probably can’t afford her ice cream or something,” Trevor said.

The man turned down a side street and vanished from view. “What if she did something to him?” Pigeon asked. “What if she made him crazy?”

“No way,” Nate said. “She’s too nice.”

“She does make magic candy,” Pigeon reminded them. “She might not be safe.”

“We’ll be careful,” Summer said.

“Weird that he knew our names,” Trevor observed.

“And that he was in such a hurry,” Pigeon added. “Don’t homeless drunks usually loaf around?”

“He was probably on drugs,” Summer said. “Some drugs make you hyper.”

They reached the crosswalk. “You kids all right?” the balding crossing guard asked. “What did that fellow want?”

“We’re fine,” Summer said. “He was just nuts.”

“If he keeps troubling you, let me know, we’ll get the police involved.”

“Thanks,” Pigeon said.

The guard held up his sign and helped them across Main. When they reached the door to the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe, they found it locked. A sign in the window proclaimed that the store was closed. As they were turning away, Mrs. White hurried to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open. “Come in, quickly!”

The kids filed in. “You’re not closed?” Pigeon asked as he crossed the threshold.

“I temporarily closed the shop so we could chat uninterrupted,” Mrs. White explained. She led them to the back of the store. “I know Pigeon and Trevor delivered their fudge because their mothers came into the shop this morning. And Nate’s dad came by on his lunch break. I trust you delivered your fudge as well, Summer?”

“Yep. My parents are divorced. I live with my dad, and he has a pretty long commute. But he really liked the fudge. I’m sure he’ll be in.”

“Good enough for me,” Mrs. White said, producing a large bag of Moon Rocks. “These are yours. Along with a new assignment, if you’re interested.”

“Jackpot,” Trevor said, accepting the bag and hefting it.

Mrs. White led them into the back of the store.

“What assignment?” Nate inquired.

“You told me that you’re explorers,” Mrs. White said, leaning against a worktable. “I have a need specific to your talents. If you accept the mission, I will provide you with a variety of new candy to get the job done, with more as a reward upon completion.”

“What kind of candy?” Summer asked.

“First, I need to know whether you accept the mission,” Mrs. White countered. “Let me share some background. An ancestor of mine named Hanaver Mills used to live in Colson, back in the old days. He witnessed the Gold Rush. A rare hardbound copy of his memoirs is on display in the town museum alongside an old pocket watch he made. As a direct descendent, I have asked the museum to return my great-grandfather’s memoirs and pocket watch to me, but they deny my claim to them. So I want you kids to acquire them on my behalf.”

“You mean steal them?” Nate asked incredulously.

“You can’t steal something that rightfully belongs to you,” Mrs. White corrected. “Even so, I only intend to borrow the memorabilia. I want to read the original printing of Hanaver’s memoirs, and I want to have a replica made of his timepiece. Then I will return them to the museum.”

“Our club sometimes trespasses for fun, but we never take anything,” Summer said.

“Or harm anything,” Pigeon added.

“You needn’t accept my offer,” Mrs. White said. “I understand that the request may seem morally complex to you. If you are unwilling, I’m sure I can find another way to reclaim these lost heirlooms. It just isn’t right. Hanaver Mills means a lot to me. It was chiefly in his memory that I chose to set up my candy shop here in Colson.”

“What sort of candy will you give us to help us succeed?” Nate asked.

“Well, if you must know, the Moon Rocks will help,” Mrs. White said. “The museum has a security system on the ground floor, covering all the doors and windows on that level. Nothing sophisticated—the sort of system you could find in a middle-class home. But none of the second-story windows are wired. I’ll also give you some Melting Pot Mixers, to conceal your identities. Little balls of chocolate that temporarily alter your race. They’re fun, you never know what you’re going to end up looking like. You’ll also get some Shock Bits, in case of an emergency. They generate an electrical charge inside you that infuses your touch with a burst of energy capable of stunning an attacker.”

“Sweet!” Trevor exclaimed.

“And one or two other mission-specific treats,” Mrs. White concluded. “What do you say?”

“Can we have some time to think it over?” Summer asked.

“Sadly, no,” Mrs. White said. “I closed the shop so we could discuss this in peace. It’s now or never. For the record, if you ever decline an assignment, our arrangement for sharing magic candy permanently ends at that moment. I require helpers I can count on.”

“When do you want this to happen?” Nate asked.

“Late Friday night,” Mrs. White responded. “Technically, early Saturday morning. Should you elect to help me out, I have a few more details for you. I’ve already conducted all the appropriate research. The task should be almost effortless if you follow my instructions.”

“I’m not sure this is right,” Pigeon said skeptically. “Remember what the guy we saw said?”

“What guy did you see?” Mrs. White asked.

“Some drunk,” Trevor said. “He seemed to have something against you.”

“He told us to stay away from you,” Summer said. “He said you were dangerous.”

“What did this man look like?” Mrs. White asked.

“Skinny and dirty,” Trevor said. “I think he’s homeless. I’ve noticed him roaming around town the past few weeks.”

“He was a crackpot,” Nate said. “I’ll help you, Mrs. White.”

“Excellent, Nate,” she said, beaming at him. “This means so much to me. You other three, if any of you feel too uncomfortable, this is not an all-or-nothing proposal. Two of you can do it, or three of you. But any who refrain get no more magic candy. I’m sorry, but that is how I do business.”

“I’ll do it,” Summer said.

“Me too,” Trevor agreed.

All eyes turned to Pigeon. He looked unsure. “What if my mom finds out?” he asked.

“The white fudge will help with that,” Mrs. White promised. “You’ll sneak out after midnight. Since you’ll be using magic candy, she won’t check on you. You’ll be back a couple of hours later, and she will be none the wiser.”

Pigeon shuffled his feet. “Can the Shock Bits kill somebody?”

“In the quantity I recommend, a small mouthful, they will give just enough of a jolt to keep others from apprehending you. Nothing lethal, or even truly harmful. Furthermore, I doubt you’ll even need to use them.”

Pigeon looked at Summer, Nate, and Trevor. “I’m in,” he said at last.

“Fabulous,” Mrs. White said. “I would hate to break up the club. One moment.” She retrieved a long cardboard cylinder from one of the worktables, uncapped it, and removed a rolled-up sheet of paper. Flattening the paper on a table, she revealed the blueprints to the William P. Colson Museum.

“You really are prepared,” Summer said, glancing at her friends in surprise.

“Here are the upper-story windows,” Mrs. White said, indicating marks on the plans. “I recommend using one of these two front windows. As you can see,

there is plenty of roof in front of them. Reaching the other windows will be more precarious.”

“How do we get through the window?” Trevor asked.

Mrs. White held up a small plastic bottle with clear fluid inside. “Squirt this solution on the glass. For a few hours, the glass will become intangible, effectively vanishing, only to reappear when the effect wears off. That way you’ll do no lasting damage to the facility. I detest vandalism. I got the formula from a magician who wanted to protect her prized collection of dishware when her grandchildren visited.”

Trevor accepted the container. “Does it work on people?”

Mrs. White shook her head. “Just glass and ceramics.”

“Too bad,” Nate lamented. “There’s a certain teacher who I wouldn’t mind vanishing for a few hours now and then.”

“Once inside,” Mrs. White continued, “you’ll be in one of two rooms, depending which window you enter. Both rooms lead to the same hall.” She indicated the areas she was discussing on the blueprints. “Sadly, three of the doors on the top floor are connected to the alarm system: the door that grants access from downstairs, and both doors to the room you need to enter.”

“Then how do we get in?” Nate asked.

“This big room is where you’ll find the memoirs and the watch,” Mrs. White said, pressing a finger against the center of the largest room on the blueprint. “Over one doorway is a narrow window, about a foot high, the same width as the door. Here’s where another of my prized candies comes in.” She held up a thin paper tube the size of a soda straw. “This is Proxy Dust.”

“Looks like a Pixie Stick,” Trevor said.

“You tear open one end and sprinkle a little of the powder onto your specially prepared Proxy Doll,” Mrs. White said, indicating a plastic doll seated on a nearby workbench. The doll was a ten-inch male surgeon dressed in scrubs, his nose and mouth hidden behind a pale green mask. “Then you swallow the rest.”

And presto! Suddenly, you're seeing through the eyes of the doll, as if your mind were inside the doll's head."

"Like remote control," Nate said.

"Exactly," Mrs. White said. "You'll want somebody with you, because while you're inhabiting the doll, you won't be aware of anything going on around you."

"Weird," Trevor said.

"To get into the room, you'll vanish the window above the door and toss the doll through the opening. Controlling the doll, make your way to the cabinet in the far corner of the room." She tapped a finger on the blueprint to clarify which corner she meant. "Do what you must to get inside the cabinet and retrieve both the pocket watch and the book. Feed some string through the broken window to recover the doll and the desired items. Break the connection with the doll by opening the eyelid of the person controlling it and blowing on the eyeball. Then bring me the memoir and the timepiece the next day, wrapped in a towel inside one of your backpacks."

"Should we walk through the museum today?" Nate asked. "To get our bearings?"

"Studying the blueprint will suffice," Mrs. White said. "I would rather you not be associated with the museum anytime this week. They do not get many visitors, and I would prefer there be no way to implicate any of you."

"Should we wear gloves?" Summer asked.

"I've tested, and the Melting Pot Mixers will alter your fingerprints," Mrs. White said. "I suggest you visit the museum around one in the morning. Wear dark clothes. Stay out of sight. Any questions?"

"You said we get reward candy?" Nate asked.

"Always," Mrs. White said. "Do you kids have any enemies?"

"There's some sixth graders who love to pick on us," Pigeon said. "They

threw Nate's backpack down the hill today."

Mrs. White grinned. "I have some trick candy you might enjoy."

Nate, Trevor, and Summer shared excited looks. Pigeon giggled and clapped his hands.

When Nate got home, a police car was parked in front of his house. He quickened his pace, worst-case scenarios playing in his mind, and hurried through the front door. His mom was in the entry hall talking to a black female police officer.

"Is everything okay?" Nate asked.

They both turned to face him. "Our Explorer was stolen," his mom said.

"When?" Nate asked.

"Just over an hour ago, right out of the garage."

"No way!" Nate said.

"You haven't seen anyone suspicious hanging around your house?" the tall police officer inquired.

Nate thought about it. "Nobody in particular."

"I think I have the info I need," the officer said. She handed his mom a card. "You can call me if you think of anything else."

"Okay, thanks for coming so quickly."

Mom let the officer out through the front door.

"How did it happen?" Nate asked as his mom shut the door.

She tossed up her hands. "I was in the kitchen and heard the garage door open. I thought maybe your dad had come home early. I went to greet him and saw the

Explorer driving away, with the garage door closing. I ran out through the front door just as the Explorer vanished around the corner—I couldn't see the driver. I called Cheryl, but she was at a friend's house, and your dad was still at the office. Want to hear the scariest part? The keys weren't on the peg by the door. Whoever it was came into the house, took the keys, opened the garage door, and drove away."

"That's freaky!" Nate said. "Sounds like it could have been somebody we know!"

"That's what the police officer said. But who do we know? We just moved in, we have no relatives in the area. Most likely, some thief cased our house, waltzed right in under my nose, and drove away in our car. Doesn't make you feel very secure, does it?"

Nate could see that the experience had left his mom feeling frazzled. He gave her a hug. "At least nobody got hurt," he said.

"Not this time," she said, biting back a sob.

"It was just some idiot who liked our car," Nate said. "It creeps me out too, but the last thing he'll do is come back here." Nate gave her a hug. "We should do something to take your mind off it. How about a treat?"

His mom held him away from her, looking at him with teary, grateful eyes. "I did pick up some more of that white fudge."

"Yeah, some fudge." Nate felt a little guilty with her gazing at him like her knight in shining armor. After all, the fudge was mostly meant to distract her so he would be free to use magic candy. But he was hoping maybe that very quality of the fudge really would calm her down about having their SUV stolen.

His mom took a deep, cleansing breath. "You want some too?"

"I'm more thirsty," Nate said. "I'm going to have some chocolate milk."

The Museum



Nate sat at the family computer playing a video game called *Grim Reign*, waiting to be told to go to bed. In the game, he was a paladin exploring a desecrated temple full of fearsome creatures. Currently he was locked in combat with a pair of mummies. It was a role-playing game, so the fighting was handled automatically—he simply selected from a menu of spells and attack options.

He kept an eye on the time in the corner of the screen. By 11:15, he began to wonder what had happened to everyone. His mom never allowed him to play on the computer for this long, plus it was more than an hour past his Friday bedtime.

Pausing the game, Nate roamed the house. The lights in the other rooms were off. Cracking his parents' door, he saw the lumps of their covered bodies in bed. His sister was in her bedroom as well, door locked, no light showing underneath.

Since when did his parents go to sleep without checking on him? For that matter, since when did they go to sleep before him at all? Friday was their date night—on the rare occasions when they stayed home, they were usually up late watching a rented movie. Tonight they had retired early without a word.

Nate returned to the computer, finished off the mummies, and found some treasure behind a sarcophagus. Feeling tired, he retreated to the nearest chamber where he could save the game, defeating a giant spider en route, and shut down the computer. After visiting the kitchen for a glass of ice water, he switched off the remaining lights and went to his room.

At his bookshelf, Nate selected a comic he had not read in a while and plopped onto his bed. As his eyes moved from panel to panel, taking in the narration and the dialogue, he began to find it difficult to focus. Having read the comic several times, he found everything too familiar. He skimmed instead of read, and could not retain the meaning of the words. He experimented with laying his head down on the bedspread for just a moment . . .

. . . and awoke with something tapping at his window. He looked around the room, disoriented, eyes settling on his clock radio. It was 12:54 a.m. He was way late.

Nate rolled off his bed and crossed to the window, where he found Trevor crouching on the roof, wearing a dark blue hooded sweatshirt. Nate unlocked the window and pushed it up. "Sorry, I dozed off," he whispered through the screen.

"No big deal," Trevor said. "So did Pigeon. I was already on his roof. Does this screen come off?"

"I'll just meet you downstairs," Nate said.

Trevor nodded. He jumped gently, gliding beyond the roof and dropping slowly out of sight. Nate quickly pulled on a black sweatshirt. Deciding that the jeans he was wearing were dark enough, he hustled down the stairs and out the front door, leaving it unlocked.

Summer and Pigeon waited on the driveway. Trevor stood in the street. Summer wore a dark jacket and black pants, and carried a backpack. Pigeon wore his studded leather jacket. Nate had not seen him in the jacket since the first day of school.

"Should I spit out this Moon Rock?" Trevor asked. "I don't want to float around while we're walking to the museum, but I have a decent amount left, and I'd rather not waste it."

"Don't spit it out," Nate said. He tapped Summer on the arm with the back of his hand. "Bring the backpack." She followed Nate across his lawn to where a whitish rock shaped roughly like a football sat between two low bushes. Grunting, Nate picked up the rock. Summer unzipped the backpack, removed the plastic surgeon doll, and held the backpack open on the grass. Waddling over,

Nate dumped the rock into it.

Trevor soared over from the street, landing near them. “Is it going to be too heavy?” he asked.

“It’s not that bad,” Nate said. “Mainly awkward to hold. It should be fine in the backpack.”

Trevor scrunched his eyebrows. “But I’m so much lighter, what if I’m not strong enough?”

“Just because gravity is pulling on you less doesn’t make you weaker,” Pigeon noted. “If you were weaker, you wouldn’t be able to jump so high. I think Nate is right—the rock won’t be too heavy to carry, but should keep you weighed down.”

Nate picked up the backpack and helped Trevor slip his arms through the straps. “You’re right,” Trevor said. “This isn’t too bad.” He jumped, and although he didn’t go very high, the weight of the rock twisted him around in midair and whipped him roughly to the ground. He ended up flat on his back. “On second thought, maybe I’ll just lose the candy,” Trevor said, spitting out the remains of the Moon Rock.

“I didn’t think about how top-heavy it would make you,” Nate apologized.

“Neither did I,” Trevor said.

They dumped the rock back between the bushes and set off down Monroe Circle toward the creek. When they reached the jogging path that paralleled the creek, they halted. “Do we eat the Melting Pot Mixers now?” Trevor asked, fishing the chocolate balls out of his pocket.

“Okay,” Summer said.

“Mrs. White said they last only about an hour, so we need to be quick,” Pigeon reminded them.

Trevor handed each of them a little ball of chocolate. They peeled off the wrappers. Nate sniffed his. It smelled like regular chocolate with a trace of mint.

“All together?” Summer asked.

The four kids popped the chocolate into their mouths in unison. “Pretty good,” Pigeon said. They stared at each other, waiting, the expectant moment stretching longer than they had anticipated.

“Here it comes,” Trevor finally said.

Tingles raced through Nate’s cheeks and sparked through his hands. His muscles began to twitch involuntarily, gently at first, then with greater intensity, until the tissue between his skin and his bones seemed to liquefy and start boiling. Despite the bizarre sensation, Nate managed to stay on his feet. Of the four, only Pigeon collapsed to the jogging path.

As the sensation subsided, Nate marveled at the new appearance of his friends. Their heights and builds remained the same, but their new features made them almost unrecognizable. Summer was now Asian, with sliver eyes and black hair. Trevor had fiery red hair, pale skin, and a swarm of freckles. Pigeon, getting to his feet, was now black. Looking at his own hands, Nate saw that he was a dark brown. “Am I Mexican?” he asked.

“You look like you’re from India,” Trevor said. Pulling back his sleeve, he held up a pallid arm. “I’m all freckly.”

“You’re a redhead,” Summer said, feeling her features. “Am I Chinese?”

“Something like that,” Nate said.

“Cool,” Pigeon said, examining himself. “I was kind of hoping for black.”

“We better get moving,” Nate said. “We’ve got only an hour in our disguises.” They followed the jogging path to Greenway, then took Greenway to Main, where the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe stood, the darkness inside making the windows opaque. With Nate in the lead, they ran across Greenway and hurried along Main. The museum was on the same side of Main as the candy shop, a couple of blocks down.

The stores and offices along Main were all dark, except for a bar on the far side of the street with neon signs glowing in the window. Antique streetlights

shed a peach fluorescent luminance at regular intervals. A single car zoomed along the street, going well over the speed limit. The wooden sidewalks, carved hitching posts, and barrel garbage cans contrasted with the electric guitars in the window of the music shop Nate was passing.

With no other pedestrians on the street, Nate felt conspicuous. He noticed the silhouette of a man in an overcoat standing in front of the bar, apparently staring at them. The man had every reason to be watching them—they were a group of fifth graders walking along an empty street at one in the morning! Nate stole covert glances at the man until he turned and wandered into the bar.

Soon they arrived at the William P. Colson Museum. A hundred years ago, the two-story building might have housed the richest people in town. The sizable structure had a single turret and a covered porch. On the far side of the museum ran a side street. The neighbor on the near side was a small, old-fashioned post office. A narrow, shadowy alley ran between the post office and the museum.

Nate, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon slipped into the alley. A cardboard box jiggled as a scrawny brown cat darted away from them. “I don’t feel good about this,” Pigeon whispered.

“It’ll be fine,” Nate said, although he had similar misgivings. Why did witnessing the fear of others tend to boost his courage? “We need to do what we planned. In and out. Pidge, you and Summer wait in the alley. You have the whistle?”

Summer unzipped a side pocket of her backpack and removed a plastic whistle, looping the string around her neck. “I’ll give it one long blow if you need to abort,” she said.

“Look,” Pigeon said, pointing at a high corner of the alley. “The bubble.”

The kids all looked up and saw a bubble the size of a baseball hovering near the roof of the post office. The bubble wobbled, drifted a bit higher, and floated out of the alley and out of sight.

“It looked the same as the bubble I saw outside the Nest,” Pigeon reported.

“Weird,” Nate said.

“What do you think it means?” Trevor asked.

Nobody had an answer. “I don’t like it,” Summer said.

“Me neither,” Nate agreed. “But we can’t do much about it now. We have to keep on task.”

Trevor and Summer started portioning out candy. Everybody got three Moon Rocks and a small handful of Shock Bits. Nate accepted the slender tube of Proxy Dust and the surgeon doll. “Remember to spit out your Moon Rock before using the Shock Bits,” Pigeon cautioned. “Mrs. White said the Mixers can be used with other candy, but that most of her sweets don’t combine well.” The others nodded.

“I want to come inside with you guys,” Summer complained.

“It only takes two,” Nate said quietly. “Keeping watch is just as important.”

“And way more boring,” Summer said. “Next time I’m doing the fun job.”

“I’ll keep watch again next time,” Pigeon volunteered.

Nate and Trevor crept to the front of the alley. Trevor held a short, rusty rod they had found at the creek. The street was quiet. Stepping into the street in front of the museum’s covered porch, Nate and Trevor each put a Moon Rock in their mouths. Nate recognized the familiar lightening sensation.

Trevor took a small hop and drifted mildly up toward the roof. Nate jumped as well, quickly passing Trevor and rising much higher than necessary. Nate was level with the second-story roof before he started descending. He landed lightly on the porch roof a little ways ahead of Trevor.

Two second-story windows opened onto the porch roof, just as the blueprints had indicated. Trevor glided to the window on the left, and Nate followed him, stepping carefully so he would move low and slow over the wooden shingles. At the window, Trevor spit out his Moon Rock, as did Nate, shingles creaking underfoot as they became heavier. Nate crouched low, eyes scanning the street, wishing they had more cover. At least the street looked empty.

Trevor removed a plastic bottle from his pocket and squirted a pane of glass with the clear solution Mrs. White had given him. The pane almost immediately disappeared. He reached his hand through the vacant square, unlocked the window, and opened it. He and Nate entered, shutting the window behind them.

The room was dark, illuminated only by light filtering in from the streetlamps outside, and it contained a female mannequin positioned as if she were weaving wool yarn into cloth on a large loom. A spinning wheel stood in the corner. A velvet rope spanned the doorway opposite the window.

Trevor and Nate walked across the room and ducked under the velvet rope into a dark hall. Trevor produced a small flashlight, and it took only a moment to find the door with the narrow window above it. "Boost me," Trevor said.

Nate laced his fingers, and Trevor stepped into the impromptu stirrup. Nate held him as high as he could. Reaching up, Trevor squirted the window with the fluid and it vanished. Trevor jumped down.

"You're up," Trevor said, taking a spool of kite string from his back pocket.

Setting the surgeon doll on the floor, Nate tore off the end of the Proxy Dust tube and slipped the tiny scrap of paper into his pocket. He sprinkled a little dust onto the doll. Upending the tube, he dumped the rest into his mouth. The dust tasted like slightly sour tangerines.

Nate instantly felt lightheaded, and reached out to support himself against the wall. The room seemed to teeter. He sat down on the floor, which swayed so steeply that he tipped onto his back, all sense of equilibrium lost.

When the room stabilized, Nate sat up, staring down at his plastic hands. He flexed his fingers, then rubbed his palms together, but felt nothing. He had no nerves. "No way," he said, his mouth soundlessly forming the shape of the words.

He glanced up at Trevor towering over him, then over at the Indian version of himself, slumped unconscious against the wall. Trevor stooped, grabbed him around the waist, and lifted him up. Nate could not feel Trevor's hand, and he experienced no sensation as Trevor raised him. If not for his sight, he would not

have known that he was moving. “That you?” Trevor asked.

“Yes,” Nate mouthed, making no sound. He waved an arm instead.

“I guess you can’t talk,” Trevor said.

Nate made an okay sign with his fingers. Trevor tied the kite string around his waist. They had decided to always keep the doll fastened to the string, in case they had to extract it hurriedly. Trevor tossed Nate through the window and lowered him to the floor.

“Nate,” Trevor said, “since you can’t talk, give the string three hard tugs when you want to come back. Until then, I’ll feed you slack and shine the light through the window.”

Although he could feel nothing, Nate found he could move pretty much like normal, right down to blinking. He ran across the room toward the corner Mrs. White had identified in the plans. The room was full of tables and displays, so he had to zigzag to reach the distant cabinet. Trevor was not tall enough to angle the flashlight beam down into the room, but enough light reflected off the roof for Nate to see fairly well.

When he arrived at the display cabinet, Nate found it was tall, with glass doors. From his ten-inch height, the cabinet looked the size of an office building. The only way in without causing damage would be to squirt the glass, but he had neglected to bring the solution.

Nate raced back the way he had come and tugged on the string. Trevor pulled him up, looking befuddled when he saw that Nate was empty-handed. Nate pointed at the window and pantomimed like he was spraying it.

“Gotcha,” Trevor said, handing Nate the plastic bottle and lowering him back into the room.

Nate raced to the cabinet. Holding the bottle under his arm like bagpipes, he squirted the window with the clear solution. The glass dissipated into nothingness.

The lowest shelf held black-and-white pictures of coal miners, a pair of work

gloves, and a large chunk of some green mineral. He would have to jump to reach the next shelf. There appeared to be just enough room between the cabinet door and the shelf for Nate to squeeze up to the next level. Leaving the plastic bottle behind, Nate jumped. Dangling from the lip of the higher shelf, he hoisted himself up with no strain. As a doll he was small but surprisingly strong.

The next shelf had more pictures, a pair of old glasses, a cracked glass mug shaped like a stout man in a tricornered hat, a cigarette case, and a deck of cards. Nate leaped and caught hold of the next shelf. Kicking out a leg, he boosted himself up. Here were more pictures, a leather-bound book, and a silver pocket watch with the numbers written in Roman numerals. Excited, Nate approached the book. Despite the dimness, he could read the title embossed in gold leaf: *The Collected Reflections of Hanaver Mills*.

Relative to his stature as a doll, the pocket watch was about the size of a manhole cover. Nate lifted it up, surprised that he felt no strain and bore the weight easily. Setting the timepiece down, he approached the book. It was fairly thick. He picked up one end of it. The weight was not a problem, but the shape made it unwieldy at his current size.

After trying a few methods of carrying the memoir, Nate decided he would probably have more luck sliding it, and then tying the string around it to get it up and through the window to Trevor.

The first dilemma was how to get the items down from the third shelf to the floor. His thinking was suddenly interrupted by the shrill sound of a whistle blowing. "Time to go," Trevor called in an urgent whisper. The flashlight beam wobbled as Trevor began taking in the slack of the string. Nate froze, looking from the timepiece to the book.

Summer peered out of the alley, waiting impatiently. How long did it take to grab two objects from a cabinet? It seemed like Nate and Trevor had been inside the museum forever. There had been a moment of tension when they first leapt up to the roof, but the action had not attracted any attention. Since then, she had seen a couple of cars go by on Main, but otherwise the uneventful waiting was mind-numbing.

“Do you think they’re all right?” Pigeon asked, breaking the silence.

“Of course,” Summer said. “Better off than we are, sitting in some stupid alley.” Looking at Pigeon, with his dark brown skin and leather jacket, it was like she was talking to a stranger. He crept forward, scanning the street. “I wish I had a mirror,” she said. “I’d love to see the Chinese rendition of myself.”

“Police car,” Pigeon warned, withdrawing deeper into the alley and crouching down. Summer shrank into the shadows as well, flattening herself against the wall. From farther back in the alley, she could see only a narrow slice of Main Street. The police car flashed by. Summer edged forward in time to see the taillights disappearing around the curve toward Greenway.

“Now, why are you kids hiding from the cops?” said a deep, no-nonsense voice behind her. Summer and Pigeon both whirled. Pigeon squealed. A few steps away, deeper in the alley, loomed a big man in an overcoat and a brown fedora. “What are you doing here?”

“Uh, nothing,” Summer said, conscious of the Moon Rock in one hand, the Shock Bits in the other, and the whistle around her neck.

“Awful late to be hanging around a dark alley doing nothing,” the man observed. He had his hands in his coat pockets.

“We could say the same to you,” Summer said.

“I’m not doing nothing,” the man said. “I noticed you two hiding here looking guilty and it made me curious. Where are your friends?”

“Who?” Summer asked innocently.

“The other two boys you were with. The Indian kid and the redhead.”

Pigeon turned and tried to run, but the man sprang forward adroitly and seized him by the collar of his jacket. He had a big hand with thick fingers and hairy knuckles. Summer saw Pigeon stuffing the Shock Bits into his mouth, so she ran from the alley and blew hard on the whistle twice.

The man released Pigeon and chased her down the wooden sidewalk, catching

up in a few long strides. He grabbed her elbow harshly in one hand and pulled the whistle off over her head with the other. Crushing the plastic whistle between his thumb and forefinger, the man hauled Summer back toward the alley. By the light of the nearest streetlamp, she could see his face better. Square jaw with a firm chin. Heavy eyebrows. Hard eyes. He was gripping her by the same arm that held the Shock Bits. She had a Moon Rock in her free hand, but didn't see how it would help her as long as he was clutching her.

Pigeon emerged from the alley just before they reached it, fingers sparking in the darkness. The man stopped just out of reach. "Shock me, shock her," the man said.

Pigeon furrowed his brow. The man changed his grip and swung Summer around, holding her out in front of him like a shield. "Shock me, shock him," Summer said.

Pigeon hesitated. "Come on," Summer insisted. He reached out a hand toward her, and the man tossed her aside and backed away. Pigeon charged him, arms outstretched, and Summer slapped her own handful of Shock Bits into her mouth. The bits of candy buzzed on her tongue and made her teeth tingle. The man twisted away from Pigeon and pulled a miniature crossbow out of his coat pocket, leveling it at him.

"That's close enough," the man ordered. Pigeon froze. After having dodged Pigeon, the man was facing mostly away from Summer.

"A crossbow?" Pigeon asked.

"I left my battle-ax in my other jeans," the man said.

Summer dove. The man must have caught the motion out of the edge of his vision, because he swiveled toward her, but her hand grazed his shoe before he could do anything. A dazzling flash accompanied the sound of a gigantic bug zapper claiming a victim, and the man was hurled several yards down the sidewalk. His crossbow clattered into the street. Tendrils of smoke curled from Summer's mouth. The Shock Bits had entirely dissolved, leaving behind a charred, metallic aftertaste.

Pigeon rushed the sprawling man. As the man sat up, Pigeon swatted him on

the side of the head. A brilliant flash accompanied by an electric crackle sent the stunned man tumbling into the street.

“Come on,” Summer urged. She and Pigeon ran off down Main, turning down the side street beyond the museum. Looking back before rounding the corner, Summer no longer saw the stranger in the overcoat lying in the street.

Timepiece or book? Although Nate guessed that the book was more important, he knew the pocket watch would be much easier to carry, and resolved it would be better to get one item than neither. Picking up the watch, he ran to the edge of the shelf.

The slack on his string was almost gone as Trevor reeled it in, and there was no way to tell him to pause, so Nate held the pocket watch over his head and dropped down through the gap between the shelf and the cabinet door, bypassing the second shelf and landing on the first. Not only was the impact painless—he felt nothing. Despite his best efforts to hold the timepiece high, Nate heard a bad sound when he landed, and saw that the glass covering the face of the watch had cracked.

Holding the timepiece under one arm and the plastic bottle under the other, Nate flung himself through the empty space where the glass had been, hugging his possessions tightly as the string pulled him swiftly back along the route he had taken. His path had wound around several tables and displays, so the ride was not smooth. Since he felt no pain, Nate’s only concern was protecting the pocket watch from further damage as he bumped around corners.

As the string dragged him, Nate managed to contort himself as needed to avoid getting hung up on anything. He promptly reached the base of the door and began to rise. He clung to the watch and the bottle as he reached the window above the door and Trevor tugged him through. Trevor kept his hands high, so instead of crashing to the floor, Nate swung wildly. A moment later Trevor set him down carefully.

From the floor, still clasping the timepiece in his unfeeling plastic arms, Nate watched as Trevor crouched down over his actual body and used his fingertips to push apart the eyelids of one eye. When Trevor blew sharply, Nate felt the wind

on his eyeball. The sensation made him blink several times. When his eyelids stopped fluttering, Nate found that he was back in his own body.

“What’s going on out there?” Nate whispered, patting his face experimentally, grateful to have nerves again.

“I haven’t looked,” Trevor said. “Can’t be good.”

Nate picked up the pocket watch, the plastic bottle, and the doll. The timepiece seemed so small relative to having carried it as a diminutive plastic surgeon. He shoved the doll into a pocket. Trevor took the watch and the bottle. “Mrs. White said none of the second-story windows had alarms on them, right?” Nate asked.

“Right,” Trevor confirmed. “You thinking we might not want to go out the front?”

Nate pointed to a window at the end of the hall. “That should let us out over the alley,” he said.

They dashed down the hall. Trevor unlocked and opened the window. There was no roof outside—just a straight drop to the alley and a view of the post office roof across the way. The window had a screen. Trevor shoved it, and the screen tumbled to the alley below.

Nate and Trevor each put a Moon Rock in their mouths. The alley remained quiet. They waited for a moment to see if the rattle of the screen would summon anyone. Nobody approached. “Think there’s anybody out there?” Nate asked.

“They might be chasing the others,” Trevor said.

“I guess we jump over to the post office roof,” Nate said, although no sane person would have tried it without a Moon Rock.

Nodding, Trevor climbed out the window and pushed off, floating lazily over to the post office roof. Nate followed him, moving in a trajectory that lifted him comfortably over the clogged gutters and onto the relatively flat roof. Staying low and stepping gingerly, they crossed to the far side of the roof. They found a parking area on the far side of the post office that continued around to the back.

The next building over was two stories high. Even with the Moon Rocks, it did not look like they could make the jump to that roof.

Trevor pointed to the back of the post office. They drifted over and looked down into a parking lot with several post office trucks. Nodding at each other, Nate and Trevor stepped off the roof, landing in an empty parking space with the force of a small hop.

“One left,” Trevor said, holding up his final Moon Rock. “Summer has the rest. Do we spit and run?”

“Leave it in,” Nate said. Behind the post office parking lot ran a chain-link fence that served as the rear boundary for several houses on a residential street. Nate motioned toward the fence. “Let’s bounce into that neighborhood.”

They sprang toward the fence, gliding high. Two more bounds and they would be over it and into the backyard. A bright beam from behind suddenly spotlighted them. “Now, there’s something you don’t see every day,” said a gruff voice.

Nate and Trevor touched down, leaping again. Nate glanced over his shoulder. A man in an overcoat was holding a long black flashlight with a blinding beam. Tall and bulky, he could certainly be the same man who had watched them from the front of the bar. The flashlight beam wobbled and Nate heard footfalls as the man sprinted after them.

“You go left, I’ll go right,” Nate said as they neared the pavement only a few yards shy of the fence. When they touched down, Trevor took off diagonally to the left. Nate veered right. Both of them easily cleared the fence. The flashlight stayed on Nate.

“You can go high but you’re not very fast,” the man threatened. Nate heard the fence rattle as the man reached it, heard the man crunch onto the wood chips on the far side.

The backyard was fairly large, with a swimming pool shaped like a peanut. Nate was about to land on the lawn. He could hear the man in the overcoat gaining, heavy footfalls on the grass. The house was too far away for Nate to vault onto the roof in a single leap. But there was a shed on the far side of the

pool that might be reachable, and the water would serve as an obstacle for his pursuer.

When Nate landed, he turned and sprang toward the shed. As he soared over the pool, a light on the back of the house switched on, flooding the yard with white radiance. Nate realized he did not have quite enough distance to reach the shed—instead he was going to land on the patio between the shed and the pool. At least he would comfortably clear the water.

The man was sprinting around the pool, but Nate could tell he would land on the patio with enough time to jump again. Nate thought he could make it up to the roof of the house with his next leap.

The man slowed as he stooped to grab something. Nate hit the patio and bounded toward the house with everything he had. At the crest of his jump, Nate judged that he was going to barely clear the gutter. His next leap would be a light skip to the top of the roof.

Nate could hear the man running directly beneath him. As he was about to land a few feet beyond the edge of the roof, something whacked into his side and thrust him brusquely down to the lawn. It took Nate a moment to realize that the man had swatted him out of the air using a long pool skimmer.

The man in the overcoat seized Nate by the front of his shirt before he could try to escape, and effortlessly lifted him into the air. “You don’t weigh any more than a piñata,” the man said.

“Let me go,” Nate said.

“Not until you answer some questions,” the man said. “What are you sucking on?”

“The people who live here are already calling the cops,” Nate said, nodding toward the house.

“That was a motion-activated light,” the man assured him. “The people living here are sound asleep.”

“I’ll scream,” Nate warned.

The man instantly clapped a hard hand over his mouth and nose. The large palm smelled faintly of cologne. “I wouldn’t, if I were you. Let’s try to keep this friendly.”

Nate gave a curt nod. The man removed his hand. “Tell me how you and your pal manage to defy gravity,” the man demanded.

The man was holding Nate high, so he had a good view of Trevor dashing toward them across the lawn. His friend obviously no longer had a Moon Rock in his mouth. “Well, if you really want to know,” Nate said, talking loudly to cover the sound of Trevor’s approach, “I’m one of the Lost Boys, and Peter Pan wanted us to get in some practice—”

At the last instant, the man sensed Trevor approaching and turned, but he was too late. Trevor extended a hand and touched the man on the chest, and with a burst of light the man was flung across the lawn.

Nate suffered the electric jolt as well, muscles clenching involuntarily, but while the man went cartwheeling across the lawn, Nate took off like a rocket. Recovering from the painful shock, Nate watched in horror as he rose higher and higher, body lazily rotating, first facing the ground, then the stars, then the ground, then the stars. Swinging his arms and twisting, Nate managed to minimize the rotation. Looking down on the post office, then on Main Street, he felt like a slow-motion version of a football during a kickoff. As he curved back toward the earth, Nate realized he was going to land on the roof of a building across the street from the post office. Even though the flight was much slower than it would normally have been, by the time the roof drew near, he had picked up alarming speed.

Limbs flailing, Nate failed to adjust his position for the impending impact, and he flopped jarringly against the shingles, bouncing high and twirling wildly. He caromed against the roof a second time and, after a disorienting spin through space, finally crashed down into the bushes behind the building.

Spitting out the Moon Rock, Nate sat up, dizzy and relieved to be alive. Although jostled and sore, he felt no sharp pain—no bones seemed to be broken. He considered going back to make sure Trevor was all right, but discarded the

idea. Trevor had shocked the man and then surely had gotten away. If Nate went back, he would just be giving the tenacious stranger in the overcoat another opportunity to catch him.

Nate got unsteadily to his feet. Keeping his Shock Bits handy, he hurried out the back of the parking lot, avoiding Main Street, and started making his way home.

Trick Candy



Only a tiny chip of his last Moon Rock was left, and Trevor flicked it around his mouth with his tongue. The candy was now so fragile that biting it was very tempting.

Trevor crouched atop the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. After shocking the man in the overcoat and sending poor Nate rocketing off into the sky, Trevor had waited to use his final Moon Rock. He had hopped the fence to the front of the house and turned down a couple of streets, winding deeper into the quiet neighborhood and farther from Main. Finding a bushy hedge with a hollow underneath, Trevor got down on his belly, wormed into the darkness, and waited.

It had not been long before the man in the overcoat came running by. He jogged halfway down the street and then doubled back, scanning the surrounding yards and rooftops, occasionally turning on his powerful flashlight to brighten a dim recess. The man had not looked closely at the hedge.

To force himself to wait, Trevor had counted slowly to three hundred after the man moved out of sight. He had not wanted to leave his hiding place prematurely and get apprehended.

When he finally did emerge from the hedge, he had become nervous walking along the sidewalks, knowing that at any moment he might happen into the man in the overcoat. So he had used his final Moon Rock and made his way home leaping through yards, over fences, and across rooftops. Aside from a few dogs barking at him, the trip from the neighborhood to the candy shop roof had been

uneventful.

Confident that he had truly ditched the man in the overcoat, and with the candy in his mouth dwindling, Trevor sprang from the roof of the candy shop, glided over Greenway, and landed on the opposite sidewalk.

After taking an accidental fifteen-foot hop upon landing, Trevor spat out the thin remnant of the Moon Rock. The waning sliver of candy was now so delicate that the urge to finish it off with a bite was almost irresistible. Perhaps biting the candy when it had almost dissolved would be no big deal—Mrs. White had never spelled out the specific consequences of chewing a Moon Rock. But Trevor certainly did not want to find out the hard way.

He trotted along the path to the Nest, hoping the others would think to reunite there. His body began to tingle, his flesh began to ripple, and, an instant later, the freckles were gone and his olive complexion had returned.

Down under the trees near the creek, it became hard to see, so Trevor switched on the little flashlight that he was still carrying. Winding through the undergrowth into the Nest, the flashlight beam soon revealed Pigeon, Nate, and Summer all waiting for him. Like Trevor, their appearances were no longer under the influence of the Melting Pot Mixers.

“Glad you made it,” Nate said, sounding relieved and giving Trevor a high-five. “We were just talking about going back for you.”

“I’m fine,” Trevor said. “The shock to the dude chasing us gave me a good head start. That guy had me pinned down for a while, though. I wound around a lot on my way back to make sure he wasn’t tailing me.”

“You still have the pocket watch?” Nate asked.

Actually, Trevor had forgotten that he was carrying it. He pulled it out of a pocket and shone the flashlight at it. A crack ran across the glass shielding the face. “Did you guys break it?” Summer asked.

“My bad,” Nate admitted. “When I was the doll, and you sounded the alarm, I had to rush. I jumped down from the third shelf of the cabinet.”

Pigeon picked up the watch and held it to his ear. Then he wound the tiny knobs and held it to his ear again. "Sounds like it still works," he said. "Just needed to be wound."

"But on top of breaking the watch, we didn't even get the book," Summer reminded them. "I knew I should have gone inside."

"I wish you had," Nate huffed. "Then we probably wouldn't have either the pocket watch or the book, and I could be the one complaining."

"Nate did a good job," Trevor said. "We didn't have much time. Who was that guy, anyway?"

"Whoever he was, he had a crossbow," Pigeon said. "He was going to shoot me."

"Only after you approached him with lightning crackling from your fingertips," Summer said.

"He didn't seem very intimidated that we could jump so high with the Moon Rocks," Nate said. He turned to Trevor. "I already told Summer and Pidge how he chased us and how you shocked him."

"Sorry about that," Trevor said.

"About launching me to the moon?" Nate said. "Better than letting that guy have me. I ended up landing all right. You shot me all the way over Main Street, though."

"I was afraid you were going to die," Trevor said. "You really took off."

"It was scary," Nate said.

"Summer saved me when the guy had me pinned," Pigeon interjected. "She shocked him down the walkway. Then I shocked him too. We ran off, but I don't think he chased us."

"Because he ended up chasing *us*," Nate said. "You guys didn't take his weapon?"

“No,” Pigeon said.

Nate folded his arms. “Then he probably had it when he was hounding me and Trevor. But he never pulled it on us. We almost got away from him—if he was really ruthless he could have shot us.”

“Of course, we could’ve yelled and brought the whole neighborhood running,” Trevor observed. “Whatever that guy is up to, he’s bad news. We definitely need to tell Mrs. White about him.”

“For sure,” Summer said. “So what now?”

Nate shrugged. “We go home, and hope our folks don’t bust us.”

“Do you think they might have noticed we were gone?” Pigeon asked, sounding more terrified than he had all night.

“I doubt it,” Nate said. “That fudge seems to work. My parents were really weird tonight. They went to bed early and didn’t even check on me.”

“Mine have been out of it too,” Trevor said.

Summer pinched her lower lip thoughtfully. “Yeah, my dad usually takes a bigger interest in my day, asks lots of questions. But not lately.”

“Well I just hope my mom is still asleep, or this may be the last you ever see of me,” Pigeon said.

“Do we meet up again tomorrow?” Nate asked.

“My family is going to my grandma’s in Walnut Creek until Sunday night,” Trevor said.

“I’m not allowed to play on Sundays,” Pigeon said sulkily.

“Let’s just meet up at school on Monday,” Summer said. “Trevor, you hang on to the watch until then. We’ll bring it to Mrs. White on the way home.”

“Okay,” Nate said. “You want us to walk you home, Summer? You live the opposite way from the rest of us.”

“I’m not worried,” she said. “It isn’t far, and I’m not Chinese anymore.”

“Still, be careful,” Nate said.

“I’m more worried about after I get home,” Pigeon grumbled.

Pigeon lived on the other side of Monroe Circle from Nate and Trevor. He had not been understating his concerns about his fate should his mother discover he had snuck out in the middle of the night. His mom was hesitant to let him walk home from school. It had taken hours of begging for her to allow him to take the training wheels off his bicycle—and the first time he had fallen, she had insisted that his father screw them back on. What would she do if she learned he had crept out of the house well after midnight? He knew exactly what. His friends would officially go into the “bad influences” category, and he would be grounded until he left for college.

Nearing his house, Pigeon stopped walking, a cold feeling forming in the pit of his stomach. A few more steps forward confirmed what he had glimpsed. There was no doubt about it. Several downstairs lights were on. His doom was sealed.

Maybe he could run away, live in the tunnel slide at the park. Maybe he could pretend he had been sleepwalking. Maybe he could give himself black eyes, bind his wrists with duct tape, throw himself in a ditch, and wait for a police officer to discover him. His mom couldn’t blame him for getting kidnapped!

Even as those ideas shuffled through his mind, Pigeon discarded them. There was no getting around this. He had to face his fate. There was no using a Moon Rock to jump up to his window and sneak inside. If the lights were on, his mom had already checked his bed and was sitting downstairs, staring at the front door, waiting for him. She had probably already called the police. And the F.B.I.

With a hopeless sigh, Pigeon trudged up the porch steps and tried the door. He was relieved to find it unlocked, as he had left it. His mom was not in the living room or the entry hall. He heard something rustle in the kitchen. She was playing it cool, pretending not to be worried. Maybe he should just sneak up to bed. No,

she would only be angrier if she knew he was trying to deceive her.

Mouth dry, head hung low, Pigeon entered the kitchen, a convicted criminal reluctantly awaiting his sentence. His mom sat at the kitchen table with a tall glass of milk and a platter half covered with white fudge, reading the newspaper. She twisted when he entered, dropping the piece of fudge in her hand. “What are you doing up?” she asked, sounding unmistakably guilty.

Pigeon blinked. “I heard some noise so I came downstairs,” he tried. Had she not noticed he was gone? Did she not notice he was in his street clothes?

His mom laid down the newspaper so it covered the platter of fudge. “Mommy just needed a glass of milk,” she said. “She was having a tough time sleeping. You march back up to bed.”

His mom was sneaking fudge! Earlier that evening, hadn’t she told his dad they were all out? Whatever was going on, he had no desire to press his luck. “Okay, I’ll just go back up to bed.”

Her expression softened. “That’s a good boy.”

Pigeon left the room. Walking up the stairs, he shook his head. It was as if the laws of nature had been turned inside out. He had just escaped an inevitable punishment for no good reason. Whatever was in that fudge had saved his life!

“Is it just me, or has Miss Doulin mellowed out?” Nate asked as he, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon walked along Greenway after school on Monday.

“You’re right,” Summer said. “She’s a lot more relaxed.”

“I was sort of testing the waters today,” Nate said. “Getting my name on the board is a freebie, and I was in the mood to see how far I could push. No matter how many jokes I cracked, or how little attention I paid, or how much I talked to Scott Simons, I didn’t even get a warning. The class has never been louder than today, and not a single name ended up on the board. And we have no homework.”

“It’s the fudge,” Pigeon said.

“That’s right!” Nate said.

“The fudge?” Trevor asked.

“I gave Miss Doulin fudge,” Pigeon said, “and it took all the fight out of her. Same with my mom. This morning, as an experiment, I took my cereal into the living room and ate it over the carpet. Mom didn’t say a thing. So I used a pair of scissors to pick at my teeth while I had a conversation with her. She acted like she didn’t even notice. Normally she would have screamed. It’s like she’s been lobotomized.”

“My dad forgot to drive me to school today,” Summer said. “He drops me off every morning. Today, he ate breakfast with me, went out to his car, and drove away. I chased him down the block. I ended up walking to school.”

“*That’s* why you showed up late,” Nate said. “And of course Miss Doulin didn’t even seem to mind.”

“I couldn’t believe it,” Summer said. “Dad bought a huge box of white fudge on Saturday, and has been eating lots of it.”

“My mom bought a ton too,” Nate said.

“My folks brought a bunch to my grandma’s yesterday,” Trevor said. “Grandma kept trying to get me to have one. I didn’t, of course.”

They reached the crosswalk. The crossing guard held up his sign and they scurried across the street and went to the front door of the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe.

The shop was open and busy. Some kids from their school crowded the counter. Several women and a few men waited in line or sat at tables eating sundry treats. The blond dwarf bustled about filling orders, along with a young man with shaggy brown hair and a blotchy red birthmark coloring half his face and neck. A very fit woman wearing workout clothes walked away from the counter holding a large box of white fudge.

Mrs. White emerged from the back and raised the folding segment of the counter. Trevor led the others into the back of the store. Pushing through the batwing doors, he discovered a translucent plastic tarp blocking the doorway. He grabbed a corner of the tarp and lifted it, allowing the others to duck past him before entering himself.

The back of the store was frosty. Their breath plumed out in front of them with each exhalation. Icicles hung from the worktables and some of the shelves, and ice glazed many surfaces. Several large coolers were stacked around the room. One was open, filled three-quarters of the way with medallions of ice and containing a few bricks of some substance snugly wrapped in white paper. Slick patches made the floor treacherous. In a cage on one of the worktables was a pair of odd birds. Black and white, they stood about two feet tall, with heavy, colorful bills. They looked like mutant penguins.

“What planet are those birds from?” asked Nate.

“Ours,” answered Pigeon. “They’re puffins. They live in the Arctic.”

“Very astute, Pigeon,” said Mrs. White.

“The genius strikes again,” Nate grumbled.

“I just like books about wildlife,” Pigeon apologized.

Summer was starting to shiver. Nate and Trevor had goose bumps on their arms. Mrs. White took four heavy woolen ponchos off pegs on the wall and distributed them to the kids, then slipped another over her own head, careful not to disturb her tidy bun.

“And how are the four of you today?” Mrs. White asked.

“Better, now that I’m not freezing,” Summer said. “Why is it so cold?”

“I’m creating treats called Frost Bites,” Mrs. White said. “The process both requires and causes a low temperature. I’m still finishing up the last two batches.”

“What do Frost Bites do?” Nate asked.

“I expect you’ll find out soon enough.” They gathered around the square table with the purple tablecloth. Mrs. White indicated a quartet of folding chairs, and the kids took the seats. “Business has been picking up lately,” Mrs. White announced happily. “I’ve continued hiring extra help to man the shop. White fudge samples always do the trick. How did your Saturday morning exploits go?”

“We got this,” Trevor said, pulling out the pocket watch.

Mrs. White looked delighted. “Clever children! And the book?”

“I had to leave the book,” Nate said. “Some guy showed up and tried to grab us.”

Mrs. White sat up a little straighter. Her smile faltered. “What guy?”

“Big guy, dark hair,” Summer said. “He wore a trench coat and an old-fashioned hat.”

“He had a crossbow,” Pigeon said. “He tried to apprehend me and Summer, but we used the Shock Bits and got away.”

“Summer blew a whistle to warn us,” Trevor said. “Nate snagged the watch, and we ran off. The guy chased us. He was fast and tough-looking. He almost caught Nate, but I shocked him.”

“You were using the Melting Pot Mixers?” Mrs. White asked.

“Yeah,” Summer said. “He didn’t see what any of us really look like.”

Mrs. White was inspecting the timepiece. She fingered the glass covering the face. “Was this cracked when you found it?”

“My fault,” Nate said, unable to make eye contact with Mrs. White. “I had to jump from the cabinet after Summer sounded the alarm. I sort of panicked.”

“I see,” Mrs. White said, frowning. She peered at the watch from several angles and held it to her ear before setting it down on the table. “Under the circumstances, you children surpassed expectations. I did not anticipate any

opposition, or you would have been better equipped. I considered this a trial run—a severe miscalculation. Shock Bits and Moon Rocks are insufficient protections from a determined foe.”

“The weird thing about that guy,” Nate said, “was that he didn’t seem very surprised about our powers. He just came out of nowhere and chased us down.”

“Do you have enemies?” Pigeon asked. “Do you know who he is?”

“I suspect who he represents,” Mrs. White said, looking at each of them in turn.

“What’s really going on?” Nate asked.

Mrs. White folded her hands in her lap. “I suppose you children deserve to know more about what is really transpiring. You see, I have come to town in pursuit of a hidden treasure. As you must have guessed, I am something of a magician. The treasure I am chasing is most valuable, but of particular worth to me, because it could help broaden the range of magical treats I produce. Others would like to lay hands on the treasure simply for the monetary value it represents. If you four help me find the hidden cache, you’ll get your fair share. There will be plenty to go around.”

“You lucked out,” Summer said. “We used to be a treasure-hunting society.”

“Only we couldn’t find any treasures to hunt,” Trevor mumbled.

“That guy who chased us is after the same treasure?” Nate asked.

“Apparently word is out that the treasure is in this vicinity,” Mrs. White said. “The treasure is ancient, dating back to the mighty civilizations who inhabited the American continents before European colonization. The treasure has been relocated numerous times, and sought by many adventurers, but some recent discoveries have given those who take an interest in such matters good reason to believe its final resting place is in or near this town. My ancestor, Hanaver Mills, was in possession of clues regarding the location of the treasure. He passed out of this life without realizing his dream of uncovering it. I intend to pick up where he left off.”

“That’s why you wanted the book,” Nate said. “To look for clues.”

“Precisely,” Mrs. White affirmed. “Hard to say where the clues I am seeking will be found—the book and the pocket watch are possible starting points. Hanaver was an eccentric man. It is tough to anticipate where his secrets might be hidden. You four did nice work this weekend, and should feel entitled to a reward.”

Mrs. White reached under the table and lifted a metal box that had a keyhole in the front. Turning a key in the hole, she raised the top of the box and removed six pieces of candy. There appeared to be three different kinds—two of each. “Trick candy,” she announced, “to baffle and dismay your enemies.”

“Cool,” Trevor said, stretching out the word so it lasted a few seconds.

“Like the majority of my candy, it will have little effect on individuals who have already consumed white fudge. And it is more potent on youngsters than adults.”

“What does it do?” Pigeon asked.

She picked up a yellow, crystalline treat. “I call these Sun Stones. They function like the opposite of a Moon Rock, increasing the pull of gravity. The candy reinforces the anatomy of the recipient to prevent the crushing force from inflicting lasting damage.” She indicated a second candy that looked like a miniature brownie. “That is a Whisker Cake. Makes hair grow at an unusual rate.” She tapped the last kind of candy, which looked like a solid sphere of root beer. “And one of my trick candy masterpieces—the Dizzy Fizzer. I’ll let you see for yourselves what it does. What are the names of your bullies?”

“Denny Clegg, Eric Andrews, and Kyle Knowles,” Summer said.

“Any of those treats should give them a memorable payback for whatever wrongs they’ve inflicted,” Mrs. White said.

“Do we get any candy we can use for ourselves?” asked Nate.

“You get to keep the leftover candy from the museum mission, which should include several mouthfuls of Shock Bits along with your stash of Moon Rocks.

And I'll be coming up with another task for you soon, which no doubt will involve a bunch of new candy. Check back with me tomorrow." Mrs. White stood up in a way that suggested the conversation was over.

"I have a question," Pigeon said. "The white fudge seems stronger than you described. It's like my mom hardly notices me anymore."

"She notices you," Mrs. White said. "She just doesn't pay enough attention to get you in trouble. The effect will go away when I stop making white fudge. For now, be glad you have the diversion you need to go adventuring in the night."

"My dad forgot to take me to school today," Summer said.

"You may have to help your parents remember to include you in their plans from time to time," Mrs. White said. "A necessary side effect."

"Our teacher, Miss Doulin, ate the fudge and is acting strange too," Nate said. "Not just to us, to all the kids."

"I'm guessing your teacher has a fairly extreme personality," Mrs. White said.

"She's pretty strict," Nate said. "Or was."

Mrs. White nodded as if this were to be expected. "The white fudge tends to normalize extreme personalities. Again, the effect is temporary, lasting only as long as the subject continues to consume the fudge. I won't keep selling it forever. When I am done here, I'll move on, and all will return to normal." She ushered the kids toward the door.

"Are they becoming addicted to the fudge?" Trevor asked. "My parents keep buying tons."

"No more addicted than some people are to a favorite breakfast cereal," Mrs. White said. "The fudge is just really yummy."

The kids returned to the front of the store. It was even more packed with customers than before. A middle-aged man with a mustache was walking away from the counter holding a tower of stacked white fudge boxes.

"Really, really, really yummy," Nate muttered to Trevor.

Nate folded the lined paper and creased it, smoothing his hands over it carefully. Miss Doulin had given them thirty minutes before lunch to study. She had not specified what they should study, nor did she seem to care, as she sat at her desk, sneaking pieces of white fudge from her drawers. Nate had elected to study the science of folding and throwing paper airplanes.

He put the finishing touches on the plane and sent it sailing to the front of the room. It veered left, sliding onto the floor beside Miss Doulin's desk. She sat hunched over a stack of papers, green marker in hand, chewing with her eyes closed. She did not notice the paper airplane, just as she had not noticed the four others, including the one that had bounced off her shoulder.

The lunch bell rang, interrupting the steady murmur of talking in the room. There had not been much teaching since the first bell rang, and even less discipline. It was as if Miss Doulin were a day away from retirement and just didn't care anymore.

Miss Doulin looked up. "Have a good lunch," she said. "Get ready to hit the books when you get back."

Yesterday when class had ended, she had pledged that the next day would be very busy. Which meant today should have gone a lot differently. Somewhere in the fudge-addled haze of her mind, Miss Doulin seemed to feel guilty enough about how she was slacking to at least pretend she had plans to improve. But Nate suspected that the class would keep getting less orderly.

"You ready?" Pigeon asked.

"Of course," Nate said.

They strolled out of the room with Summer and met Trevor among the tables in the lunch area. Most of the lunch tables were either indoors or on a central concrete patio surrounded by buildings on three sides. But there were a few isolated lunch tables around the corner from the main area. They were rarely used, but Trevor, Summer, Nate, and Pigeon hurried to the exiled tables to claim their spot. They did not want the supernatural spectacle to play out in front of the

whole school.

“What if they don’t find us over here?” Pigeon asked.

“They’ll find us,” Summer assured him. “They’ll think we’re trying to hide because we’re not in our regular spot. They’ll wonder what special dessert Pigeon has today.”

“Do I look like I’m eating casually?” Pigeon asked, taking a bite from his sandwich.

“Lean back a little more,” Nate instructed. “And kind of dip your shoulder.”

“Your right eye is open too wide,” Trevor said. “Close it halfway.”

“Tilt your head,” Nate suggested.

Pigeon looked increasingly silly as he followed their directions.

“Knock it off, you guys,” Summer said. “Pigeon, don’t try to *act* casual, just *be* casual. Or be nervous. Just don’t be fake.”

“Hey!” called a voice coming around the corner of the building. Denny walked toward them, followed by Eric and Kyle. “What’s with the new table? You guys too cool to eat with everybody else?”

“More like they’re hiding,” Eric said.

“Where’s the jacket, Pigeon?” Kyle teased. “I’m starting to miss it!”

“At least you still have your army jacket to keep you company,” Nate said. Kyle was wearing the same jacket he had worn at the creek. He wore it most days. “Does it remind you of your days serving our country?”

“Man, Dirt Face,” Denny said in disbelief, “you do not know when to shut up. That mouth is going to get you in trouble one of these days. Hey, Pigeon, what’s for dessert today?”

Pigeon clutched his lunch bag close to his chest. “Nothing you’d want.”

“We’re not picky,” Eric said, reaching for the bag.

Pigeon let him have it. Eric handed it to Denny.

“See, Dirt Face, Pigeon knows how to keep things simple,” Denny said, rummaging through the sack. He pulled out a sandwich bag with three unusual pieces of candy inside. “What have we here? A special treat? What are these, Pigeon?”

“Candy,” he said.

“Not a lot, though,” Denny said. “Only one for each of us.” He sniffed the yellow crystalline candy, kept that, and handed the sandwich bag to Eric. Flat-faced Eric chose the one that looked like the little brownie, and Kyle received the root beer sphere.

“I’ve never seen candy like this,” Kyle said, eyeing the brown ball. “Where’d you get it?”

“My mom picked it up somewhere,” Pigeon said.

Eric started chewing his candy. Denny and Kyle popped theirs into their mouths. “Not bad,” Denny said. “Like lemon meringue pie. Sort of sticks to my mouth, though.” Denny swayed, a worried look crossing his face, and began to stoop. Straining, he managed to wrench himself upright. His features drooped, and his arms hung trembling at his sides. Suddenly, as if his legs were loaded with mousetrap springs, his body whipped down to the concrete patio with a mighty slap.

“What did you give us?” Eric asked, his hair already down to his shoulders, his eyebrows getting bushier, wispy whiskers emerging on his chin.

Kyle staggered and clutched the end of a lunch table to steady himself. “Oh, no,” he moaned, eyes wide, one hand on his stomach.

Denny did not move. He groaned, but his entire body appeared to be glued to the patio. Eric crouched beside Denny, hair growing so swiftly that his head looked like a fountain, but he could not even budge one of Denny’s arms. Kyle dropped to his knees, still gripping the end of the table.

“This is impossible!” Eric stammered, rising to his feet. The hair on his scalp already reached the ground. The long hairs of his sparse beard reached beyond his waist. Tufts of fur protruded from his ears and nostrils. “You okay, Kyle?”

Kyle opened his mouth to respond and amber foam frothed from his lips. He covered his mouth, but despite his efforts to contain it, a bubbly stream of foam gushed out, much of it splashing onto Denny’s immobilized legs. Eric ran away, his hair trailing behind him on the ground like a long bridal train, his beard dangling between his legs. Froth continued to faucet from Kyle’s nose and mouth, as well as to foam up from the waistband of his pants and spew out the bottoms of his pant legs.

Panicking, Kyle stumbled to his feet and tried to run, but he leaned heavily to one side and flopped to the ground after only a few paces, foam geysering from every available opening.

Summer watched the display in amazement. Nate, Trevor, and Pigeon laughed uncontrollably. Pigeon had tears streaming down his cheeks.

As the foam erupting from Kyle began to subside, leaving his clothes completely drenched, Nate tapped Summer. “We better beat it,” he said.

Summer nodded.

Denny had not moved an inch. He continued to groan. While the others hurried away, Pigeon squatted beside him and said, “You better learn to watch what you eat.”

A Grave Assignment



Summer leaned against the flagpole at the front of Mt. Diablo Elementary, waiting for the other Blue Falcons. The parking lot was jammed with the cars of parents picking up their kids. Several buses idled at the curb, one of them near enough for the exhaust fumes to bother her.

When class had let out, Nate had accompanied Pigeon to the rest room. Ever since admonishing Denny to watch what he ate, Pigeon had grown progressively more paranoid. He was certain that vicious retaliation was inevitable, and had even discussed submitting a written apology. Summer and Nate had warned that if he showed any weakness, he would be doomed. Their best hope was to act confident and pray that Denny, Eric, and Kyle would be too intimidated by the effects of the magic candy to strike back.

As extra precautions, Nate had chaperoned Pigeon to the rest room, and they were all meeting in front of the school in order to take a different route home. If Denny opted to seek revenge, he would probably ambush them at the ramp that descended to Greenway.

Summer had mixed feelings about what they had done. Denny, Eric, and Kyle deserved to be humbled—they had ruthlessly bullied others for years. But even though the candy was designed to inflict no lasting damage, feeding it to them seemed almost too harsh, like issuing the death penalty for shoplifting. Denny had never actually beaten up any of them. He was just a pushy jerk who liked to steal lunch desserts and start dirt clod fights down at the creek. It was almost a game. Terrifying Denny and his friends with supernatural punishments might scare them into leaving the Blue Falcons alone. Or it could escalate the

animosity into something much more real and dangerous.

Summer tried to picture how she would react if somebody gave her candy that made her vomit foam until she was soaked. Wouldn't she be furious? She would certainly want retribution. She might even involve the police.

Somebody tapped her on the shoulder. She looked, but nobody was there. Turning the other way, she saw Trevor. "Gotcha," he said. "Where's Nate and Pidge?"

"Pigeon had to make a pit stop," Summer said.

"I've had the best feeling all day," Trevor said. "There should be Munchkins coming out of hiding and dancing in the streets."

"Except I'm not sure the witch is dead," Summer said. "Dorothy and her friends might get assaulted on the way home."

"No way," Trevor said. "Those guys are going to stay a million miles away from us. They probably think we have super powers or know voodoo. Would you mess with somebody who could turn gravity against you?"

"No, but who knows if they'll be able to make sense of what happened? They might decide we drugged the candy and they dreamed the weird results. I mean, what happened seems impossible."

"If all else fails, we break out the Shock Bits," Trevor said, as if that idea ended the discussion.

"Don't you think that's a little extreme?"

"Depends on what they're trying to do."

"What if it stops their hearts?" she asked. "When I shocked that guy, he flew a long ways. A lot farther than any stun gun would throw him. And stun guns can give people heart attacks."

"We'll do what we have to," Trevor said. "Now that we started fighting back, we can't let up, or they'll make us pay for years."

“That’s exactly right,” Nate said, approaching with Pigeon. “They asked for it. Once they stop asking for it, we’ll stop giving it to them. But not before. Besides, after today we should add some new weapons to our arsenal.”

“I hope you guys are right,” Summer said.

“You’re as bad as Pigeon,” Nate accused. “There is nothing wrong with giving a stupid, mean bully a taste of his own medicine.”

“Except Denny isn’t stupid,” Summer said. “Mean, yes. Stupid, no. And unlike some bullies, he’s not a coward. Last year he thrashed a sixth grader who was bigger than him.”

“Tom Turrel?” Trevor said. “He was big, but it was all fat.”

“Would you have fought him?” Summer asked.

“No way—what if he sat on me!”

“Sounds like Summer might have a thing for Denny,” Nate said.

Summer clenched her teeth. She wanted to slap Nate for saying something so stupid and embarrassing, but managed to restrain the impulse. “I’m just saying we should be ready for Denny to come looking for revenge, no matter how scared he should be.”

“We’re with you there!” Trevor said. “Why do you think we’re sneaking home a different way?”

“We want to be careful,” Nate said diplomatically. “We’re also having fun enjoying the victory.”

Summer resisted a smile. “It was pretty funny,” she admitted. “They were freaked out.”

“It was the most hilarious thing that has ever happened,” Pigeon agreed. “I’m just worried it might cost me my life. And that my mom won’t be able to stop eating fudge long enough to hold a funeral. They’ll probably just dump me in a hole in the backyard.”

The four of them walked west along Oak Grove Avenue, the street that granted access to the school parking lot. Going home this way would make the walk nearly twice as long, since they all lived south of the school, and the first few southbound cross streets west of Mt. Diablo Elementary ended in cul-de-sacs. The slope at the rear of the school continued west for some distance before the incline diminished, allowing a road to connect the top of the ridge to the bottom.

A block down from the school on Oak Grove waited a boxy old ice cream truck. The shabby vehicle was painted a faded blue. Music chimed from hidden speakers. The words *Candy Wagon* were emblazoned on the side in black cursive. A semicircle of kids huddled around the opening in the side of the truck.

“Is that Mr. Stott?” Pigeon asked hopefully.

“Looks like it,” Trevor said, hurrying forward with Pigeon at his heels.

“Who’s Mr. Stott?” Nate inquired, continuing alongside Summer.

“He’s the best ice cream man,” she said, “but he hasn’t come around for over a year.”

Summer and Nate caught up to Trevor and Pigeon, who were waiting behind other kids. Mr. Stott was handing a red-white-and-blue Popsicle to a young black girl. He looked to be in his late sixties or seventies. His silver beard hung halfway down his chest and had a pair of dark streaks that ran from his chin almost to the end of his whiskers. His bushy eyebrows dipped and bobbed expressively, and he wore his silver hair smoothed back close to his scalp. Notwithstanding his age, Mr. Stott was robust, with a gruff, grandfatherly voice.

“Any of you guys have money?” Trevor begged. “I’ll pay you back.”

“My mom gave me a ten this morning,” Pigeon said reluctantly. “I’m supposed to buy white fudge on the way home.”

“Spot me?” Trevor persisted. “What I want is only fifty cents.”

Pigeon had reached the front of the line. Only the four of them remained beside the truck.

“Here are some familiar faces,” Mr. Stott chuckled. “Trevor, Pigeon, Summer . . . and I’m not sure I’ve met you.”

“Nate,” Summer said.

“Hi,” Nate said with a little wave.

“Good to meet you,” Mr. Stott boomed. “Sebastian Stott, at your service.”

“Where have you been, Mr. Stott?” Trevor asked.

“Here and there,” Mr. Stott said. “At my age, an extended vacation now and again helps keep the motor running. Why, were you looking for me down at the cemetery?”

“No,” Trevor and Pigeon said together.

“I hope not. I anticipate several more encores before the curtain falls. What can I get you?”

“Whatever Trevor wants and a frozen banana,” Pigeon said.

“You’re putting up the cash today, huh?” Mr. Stott said, pulling a chocolate-dipped banana out of the freezer. “Hope that means he’ll be paying tomorrow.”

“I’ll pay him back,” Trevor promised. “I’ll have a Lightning Rod.”

“Good choices,” Mr. Stott said, taking a striped frozen fruit bar from the freezer. “I dip the bananas and make the Lightning Rods myself, you know.”

“They’re the best,” Pigeon said.

“I was correct to assume you’re still going by ‘Pigeon’?” Mr. Stott asked.

“Yep,” Pigeon said, unwrapping his treat.

“You might outgrow that moniker soon. You’re going to have to upgrade to a bigger bird. Let’s see . . . how about Condor?”

“Maybe,” Pigeon said noncommittally. He looked over his shoulder. “You guys want anything?”

“What about your mom?” Summer said.

“Honestly, as long as I come home with fudge, I don’t think she’ll be counting the change,” Pigeon said.

“You wouldn’t be referring to fudge from that new Sweet Tooth place?” Mr. Stott interjected. “That shop is going to run me out of business.”

“No way,” Trevor said. “She doesn’t drive around.”

Mr. Stott scrunched his eyebrows. “I don’t know . . . have you kids tried that white fudge of hers?”

They all shook their heads.

Mr. Stott scratched his beard just below the corner of his mouth. “Might be safer to keep it that way. I don’t know what she puts in that stuff, but after the first bite, it is hard to resist. I’m not sure she needs to drive through neighborhoods in order to ruin me.”

“I’ll have a Tooty Fruity,” Summer said.

“Sure you have enough to cover all this?” Mr. Stott asked Pigeon in a confidential tone.

Pigeon proudly flashed the ten-dollar bill.

“And Mrs. Bowen won’t mind?” Mr. Stott pursued.

“I’m feeling good about my chances,” Pigeon said.

“One Tooty Fruity coming up,” Mr. Stott announced in a more boisterous voice. “How about you, Nate?”

“You have candy too?” Nate asked.

“It’s the Candy Wagon,” Mr. Stott said, slapping the poster beneath the

window that listed a broad array of treats and snacks. He handed Summer her Tooty Fruity.

“I’ll just have a piece of red licorice,” Nate said.

“*Just* a piece of licorice? Licorice is part of a proud candy tradition. I’ll even spice it up for you, if you want, make it a Powder Keg.”

“A Powder Keg?” Nate repeated.

“Easiest thing in the world,” Mr. Stott said. “An old favorite with some extra kick.” His hands began doing the work he was describing. “Tear off the end of a piece of red licorice. Dump in the contents of a Pixie Stick. And voila! Instant Powder Keg!”

“Thanks,” Nate said, accepting the candy.

Mr. Stott winked. “You stay in this business as long as I have, you learn a trick or two. That will be a dollar seventy.”

“Your prices are so low,” Nate remarked.

“Easier to say when you’re not paying, right, Pigeon?” Mr. Stott took the ten and handed Pigeon his change. “But yes, I take pride in the fact that I have not raised my prices for almost twenty years.”

“If Mrs. White is putting on the pressure with her candy shop,” Trevor said, “we’d be glad to pay a little more.”

“Very kind,” Mr. Stott said, “but somehow I think I’ll survive. You can’t take those long vacations unless you’ve put aside a healthy nest egg.” He winked. “You youngsters keep out of trouble.”

“You bet,” Pigeon said, trying to pocket his change with one hand while holding the frozen banana in the other. He was having trouble stuffing in the cash because his jeans fit too tight.

They turned down a road called Winding Way and descended into the little valley that housed much of Colson. Many shade trees grew along Winding Way, and the modest houses along it had tidy yards.

Summer noticed Nate eyeing her Tooty Fruity. “Want the last of it?” she offered.

“I’m okay,” Nate said. “That Powder Keg was pretty good.”

“I’m not sick or anything,” Summer said. “Tastes like peaches and cream, with a hint of strawberry.”

“Okay, you sold me,” Nate said, accepting the Tooty Fruity and finishing it off.

“What do you think Mrs. White will want us to do this time?” Pigeon asked. “Rob a bank?”

“If she does,” Nate said, “I think Condor is the man for the job.”

Summer and Trevor giggled.

“We should make you a feathery costume,” Nate said.

Pigeon rolled his eyes, trying to keep a smile from creeping onto his face. “I’m going to stick with Pigeon.”

“We could still make a costume,” Nate said. “You still haven’t told me how you got the name. Have I been in the club long enough?”

Pigeon glanced at Trevor and Summer. “Should I tell him?”

“Up to you,” Summer said.

“Tell him, it’s funny,” Trevor prodded.

“You tell it,” Pigeon said.

“Okay,” Trevor began, excited to have permission, “so, almost three years ago, during second grade, Pigeon used to sit alone at lunch. My family had moved here that year, and I hadn’t really met Summer or Pigeon yet. Anyway, you’ve probably noticed our school has a lot of seagulls hanging around at lunchtime. Don’t ask me why, we’re what, fifty miles from the ocean? Anyway,

the point is, we get lots of seagulls, but you never see any pigeons.”

“Right,” Nate said.

“Well, one day this pigeon shows up, and Pigeon, he was Paul back then, starts feeding it. They became friends. That same pigeon would show up at lunch and sit with Paul without fail, eating little crumbs of his sandwich or whatever.”

“Then one day,” Pigeon jumped in, “I put a breadcrumb on my arm. And the pigeon hops up onto my sleeve and eats it. So I put a piece of bread on my shoulder. And the pigeon perched up there and ate it.”

“Everybody starts noticing this pigeon on Paul,” Summer said, holding back laughter. “And everybody starts gathering around him, checking it out.”

“Then the pigeon hops on top of his head,” Trevor said. “It stands there for a minute, just staring at everybody.”

“And then it made a mess on me,” Pigeon said. Nate cracked up, and the others laughed hard as well. “I had all this gooey white gunk in my hair.”

“Everybody saw it,” Summer gasped through her laughter.

“And he’s been Pigeon ever since,” Trevor finished.

“Did you ever see the pigeon again?” Nate asked once the laughter died down.

“No, never,” Pigeon said. “I’ve never seen another pigeon at our school, before or since. It was like he deliberately showed up long enough to humiliate me, then took off forever.”

“That is hysterical,” Nate said. “I guess you should be glad you aren’t called Condor.”

They all cackled again.

The line at the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe spilled out the front

door and along the walkway. Old and young, male and female, dozens of people waited anxiously for their sugar fix.

The crowd made Nate recall what Mr. Stott had said about being run out of business. Maybe he was right. To have a line like that at 3:00 p.m. on a Tuesday meant Sweet Tooth was becoming a major fad.

Nate led Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon through the front doors, shouldering past the people in line. The dwarf and the guy with the lurid birthmark looked frazzled as they hustled to fill orders. Mrs. White was handing two boxes of white fudge to a young man with stubbly facial hair and an earring. Nate noticed envious looks from many of the waiting customers as Mrs. White greeted the four of them enthusiastically, raised the counter, and escorted them into the back.

There was no indication that the back of the store had ever been as frigid as a meat locker. Dozens of trays of white fudge rested on the worktables and filled tall racks.

“Welcome, welcome,” Mrs. White said, “we’re in the midst of our busiest day yet. You wouldn’t believe the orders we’ve been getting. I’ll be up all night replenishing our supply of white fudge! Maybe I should spoil a batch or two, slow things down a bit. I need to do more hiring! How are you doing? Did you repay your bullies?”

“Repaid them and then some,” Nate said.

“How wonderful, I’m glad the trick candy went to good use,” Mrs. White said. “I’m a little overwhelmed today, so we’ll have to be quick, but I do have a new assignment for you. Turns out it was fortunate you opted for the pocket watch over the book, Nate. I dismantled the watch and discovered a message on the back of the face. The letters were so miniscule, they could have been written with an eyelash. The note indicated that Hanaver Mills was buried with an important item hidden in an ivory box. By implication, the message granted permission to exhume him.”

“What?” Trevor asked.

“To unbury him,” Pigeon interpreted.

“Of course, we would suffer an endless runaround if we tried to obtain permission through formal channels. I would prefer you four visit the Colson Valley Cemetery tomorrow night and see what you can dig up.”

“You want us to rob a grave?” Nate asked.

“Goodness, no,” Mrs. White said. “I want you to seek out the item referenced in the pocket watch message. Take the item in the box, an item meant to be claimed, and rebury the rest.”

“What if we get caught?” Trevor asked.

“You’ll be much better equipped than last time,” Mrs. White promised. “Let’s see, for Summer I have a package of Flame Outs. I would prefer if she were the only person to use them. It might be gender bias, but I believe that she has the coolest head of all of you. Summer, when you put one of these in your mouth, it will emerge as a searing ball of fire. Use a Flame Out only under dire circumstances, for the effect can be lethal. Never chew it or use more than one at a time. Never use one indoors, or you may very well incinerate yourself along with your target.”

“I don’t want candy that could kill someone,” Summer said.

Mrs. White sighed, glancing at her wristwatch. “Lots of things have the potential to kill someone, my dear. A baseball bat. A ladder. A bicycle. It all depends on how you use them. I don’t give you these Flame Outs to cremate people. Maybe you’ll need a distraction. Maybe you’ll need to disable an unoccupied car. Who knows?” She passed the candy to Summer. “Might come in handy to have some extra fire power.”

Mrs. White turned to Nate. “You did a fine job operating the Proxy Doll last time, so I am giving you more Proxy Dust, along with a new subject to control. I call him the Forty-niner.” She pointed to a squat caricature of an old miner carved out of wood standing beside one of the worktables. The figure had crazed eyes, a shapeless hat, and a white beard, and stood about three feet tall. He clutched a pickax in one hand and a shovel in the other. The pickax and shovel were made of metal.

“The Forty-niner is designed for tunneling,” Mrs. White went on. “Like the

surgeon doll, he is stronger than he looks. Using him, you should have no trouble burrowing down to the burial vault and accessing the casket. You know what I mean by a burial vault?"

"Pigeon?" Nate asked.

"The container that encloses the coffin?" he ventured.

"In this instance made of stone," Mrs. White approved.

"Let me guess," Nate said. "You read a lot of books about undertaking."

"I actually figured that one out through context," Pigeon responded.

"You'll have to pry up the sealed lid of the burial vault," Mrs. White said. "The Forty-niner should be able to handle it." She handed Nate a dose of Proxy Dust, then gave Trevor a clear plastic container holding several white candies. "These are Frost Bites. They'll make your body radiate intense cold while you suck on them. Water will freeze in your presence, and you'll be immune to the effects of heat and fire. Using two at a time will heighten the results, but I do not suggest trying more than that."

"I'm not sure this is right, exhuming bodies," Pigeon protested.

"One body," Mrs. White corrected. "Don't fret, Pigeon, I didn't forget about you. I thought you should carry some of my Sweet Teeth." She held up a baggie with six candy corns in it. "The Sweet Tooth is a specialty of mine, so much so that it shares its name with my store. You'll feel tempted to chew them—don't. Just let them dissolve, and use only one at a time. While a Sweet Tooth is in your mouth, others will find it difficult to disobey or disbelieve your suggestions. There is an art to it. You don't want to push people too hard or contradict reality too blatantly, or the spell will collapse. You'll find that a little subtlety goes a long way. Different people will exhibit different levels of resistance. The Sweet Tooth does not work as well on those who are aware it exists—for example, you would find it tricky to influence Nate or Summer or Trevor, now that they know what the candy can do."

"How do we know you haven't used a Sweet Tooth on us?" Pigeon asked.

Mrs. White smiled. “I suppose you don’t, although most of my candy works only when used by children, so I probably couldn’t use a Sweet Tooth even if I so desired. In addition, I assure you that I would not share magic candy with youngsters whom I had to coerce into accepting it. There are plenty who would help me voluntarily. Can I entrust these to you?”

“Sure, but—” Pigeon began.

“I realize some of you may be uncomfortable with this new task,” Mrs. White interrupted, handing Pigeon the bag of candy corns. “Keep in mind, you are a treasure-hunting club, and treasure hunters often have to raid burial grounds in search of clues and artifacts, from the pyramids, to sunken ships entombing drowned sailors, to various necropolises around the globe. In this instance, we have permission from the deceased, who is a relative of mine, so you need not fret about ethics.

“If any of you wish to back out, please take this opportunity to surrender your candy to those willing to undertake the adventure, keeping in mind that your refusal to cooperate will mark the end of our secret relationship. If none of you are willing to claim the next clue, please return all the candy and I’ll find others to assist me. Naturally, whatever our relationship, I’ll expect you to keep the secrets I have shared with you, not that many would give such preposterous notions much credence.”

“Will all your tasks involve stealing from museums or graveyards?” Nate asked.

“Not all of them,” Mrs. White assured him. “Although when it becomes necessary, you will find I am willing to bend the rules to accomplish my aims. Others are actively competing for the prize we are chasing. If you go by the museum, you will find that the memoirs of Hanaver Mills are now missing, along with his pocket watch.”

“Do you know who grabbed the book?” Trevor asked.

“No idea,” Mrs. White said. “Perhaps the same man who chased you the other night. At any rate, can I rely on your continued assistance? I have to get back.”

“I’ll do it,” Nate said.

“Me too,” Trevor said.

Summer and Pigeon nodded, but Pigeon looked reluctant.

“One more wrinkle that I wanted to withhold until you accepted the mission,” Mrs. White said. “Hanaver Mills is not buried under the headstone with his name on it. To throw off unworthy trespassers, he was interred under a tombstone inscribed ‘Margaret Spencer 1834–1893.’ You’ll find the monument not far from his own.”

“All this was in the note,” Pigeon said.

“Written by his own hand,” Mrs. White said. “Here is another Melting Pot Mixer for each of you. Be careful. Do your best to disguise the fact that you have disturbed the gravesite. Here are some extra Shock Bits as well for you to share. Sadly, I really am in a rush. Good luck Wednesday night. Please bring what you find to the shop on Thursday. I’ll be waiting with another reward.”

Unearthing Secrets



Afternoon sunlight filtered through the overlapping branches above the Nest as Summer, Nate, Trevor, and Pigeon sat on the ground facing each other. Between them, on a weathered remnant of cardboard, sat all the magic candy they had collected to date: the Moon Rocks, the Shock Bits, and three leftover pieces of trick candy, along with the new candy they had just received from Mrs. White.

Nearby stood the Forty-niner. After exiting the candy shop, the four friends had looped around back where Mrs. White had met them at an unmarked door. She had then entrusted them with the Forty-niner, bundled in a green bedsheet. The wooden figure was so heavy that Trevor and Nate had to share the load. The two of them had lugged the wooden miner directly to their hideout by the creek.

Beside the Forty-niner sat two boxes of white fudge Pigeon had purchased for his mother.

“Hear ye, hear ye,” Pigeon announced, “the governing council for the Blue Falcon Treasure-Hunting Society is now in session. Our president, Summer Adler, presiding.”

“I feel like such a nerd,” Nate muttered.

“I appreciate all of you gathering on such short notice for this important discussion,” Summer said, ignoring Nate’s grumbles. “Pigeon requested we convene immediately, and, given the importance of the topic at hand, I seconded the motion. Pigeon?”

“Thank you,” Pigeon said. “Guys, I’m worried that we’ve gotten in way over our heads. Candy that makes you float around is one thing. Candy that lets you create infernos and control people’s minds is another. Whoever Mrs. White is, she is very powerful, and I’m starting to really worry she might not be one of the good guys.”

“Is it because of that drunk dude?” Nate said.

“He’s part of the reason,” Pigeon said. “Remember how he warned us about robbing graves? What if he really did come from the future? We’ve seen magic candy that can produce equally impossible results.”

“The psycho said he was me,” Nate said. “He didn’t look anything like me. There is no chance I’m going to look like that when I grow up.”

“And maybe it was nothing,” Summer said. “But keep it in mind, especially since he somehow knew we would be robbing graves.”

“Maybe he’s from Mrs. White’s competition,” Trevor said. “You know, trying to make us distrust her in order to slow her down.”

“Another possibility,” Pigeon conceded. “Don’t get me wrong. I’m in no hurry to jump to hasty conclusions. I just want to make sure we’ve considered all the different possibilities before we keep helping her.”

“But we have to do this mission,” Nate said. “We already took the candy.”

“We could return it,” Summer said.

“Tell me this,” Pigeon said. “If Mrs. White is so powerful that she can make magic candy, why is she relying on fifth graders to run all her errands?”

“She said the candy only works well on kids,” Nate reminded them.

“Shouldn’t there be some other way?” Pigeon persisted. “It seems irresponsible to send kids around trespassing and stealing stuff.” Nate folded his arms. Trevor shifted his feet. “It seems to me like Mrs. White doesn’t want to take any risks herself, and she thinks kids are easy to manipulate.”

“Part of it might just be that she likes to see kids using her candy,” Trevor suggested.

“She acted like that at first,” Pigeon said. “Have you noticed how she has gotten more and more demanding? How she now spends more time threatening to take the candy away than offering to share it with us?”

“Just because she wants to find this treasure doesn’t make her wicked,” Nate argued. “Sure, I think she really wants to find it, and yeah, she wants helpers who will do their part. But that doesn’t make the candy less fun, or the adventure less cool. And it doesn’t make her a villain.”

“I agree,” Trevor said.

“We’re not saying she’s evil,” Summer said.

“Just that she might be,” Pigeon clarified. “How do we know what the message in the pocket watch really said? How do we know that she is truly related to Hanaver Mills? How do we know if there is actually a treasure? Or that she would share it with us if she finds it?”

“Here’s the other question,” Nate said. “Is the candy so awesome that you would do all this just to be able to use it? The answer for me is yes. I’ve hoped all my life that something this cool would happen to me. I used to salvage broken appliances and collect little scraps of wire and metal in hopes that someday I would assemble it all into a robot. Guess what? I never got close. I used to mix magical potions out of ingredients from the pantry. They didn’t work, but my grandma was nice enough to buy them for a quarter and pretend to drink them. And I’ve had a million other daydreams that never happened either. But this is real. Magic candy that actually works. If I get treasure on top of it, that’s just a bonus.”

“But what if Mrs. White really is dangerous?” Summer asked. “We’re not just concerned that she might not share the treasure. What if the white fudge is harming our families in ways she hasn’t told us? What if we end up helping her carry out some terrible scheme that hurts people?”

“Don’t you think that sounds a little paranoid?” Trevor asked. “I mean, the lady makes magic candy. If she wants to cause harm, she’ll cause harm, whether

we help or not. What reason would she have to lie to us? Why involve us at all?"

Summer and Pigeon were silent. "I don't know," Pigeon finally said. "I just want to be careful. I mean, are we really going to go dig somebody up at the cemetery tomorrow night?"

"I'll be doing the digging," Nate said. "The rest of you just have to keep watch and help collect whatever is hidden in the coffin."

"I'm not sure I totally trust Mrs. White," Trevor confessed. "I have my doubts about her. But I definitely want to see what is in that grave. And think about this: If she *is* evil, wouldn't it be best if we were in a position to keep an eye on her? Who else is going to stop her? The police? She has magic—she'll just give them white fudge and send them away."

"Or hypnotize them with a Sweet Tooth," Nate said. "I'm with Trevor—we need to watch her closely."

"I guess that makes sense," Summer said slowly. "In that case, I think we should examine whatever we find in the grave ourselves before we hand it over to her. I would have liked to have seen that note on the watch."

"For all we know, we may really be digging up Margaret Spencer," Pigeon said. "This could have nothing to do with Hanaver Mills."

"You know," Nate said, "Mrs. White could fake a note as easily as she could fake a story."

"Not if we had examined the watch ourselves when we first got it," Summer said. "That's all I'm saying."

"I'm fine with checking out what we find before turning it over to her," Nate said.

"Meet here tomorrow at midnight?" Trevor proposed.

The others agreed.

"Bring your bikes," Summer suggested. "And don't fall asleep this time."

Located on Main Street, the Colson General Store lacked gas pumps on the outside, and fell short of offering a broad enough selection for serious grocery shopping on the inside. It was an ideal place for snacks like doughnuts or chips or candy or jerky or soda or hot dogs or nachos, and certain essentials like milk, eggs, bread, pasta, and cereal. You could also find some auto supplies, a fair amount of hardware, and a decent assortment of over-the-counter medication. Liquor, cigarettes, magazines, paperback novels, greeting cards, helium balloons, piñatas, DVD rentals—the store boasted those as well.

On Wednesday afternoon, shopping in the Colson General Store with his mother, Trevor found himself striving to avoid the attention of the man seated on the bench beside the newspaper stand. The man had a toothpick in his mouth, and was taking his time leafing through the *Contra Costa Times*. He wore an overcoat and a brown fedora with a black band. He was definitely the same man who had chased Trevor through the neighborhood behind the William P. Colson Museum.

Trevor knew the man had only glimpsed him as a freckly redhead in the dark. There was no chance of his being recognized—Trevor was even wearing different shoes than he had worn that night. He knew that only by acting suspicious could he possibly earn any serious attention from the man.

And yet Trevor could not resist spying.

He dawdled at a rack of packaged fruit pies, brand name and generic, pretending to be torn on which to choose, handling a blackberry pie, then a vanilla pudding pie, then apple, then blackberry again. He stole glances through the rack at the profile of the man reading the newspaper on the bench.

The man was indeed reading the paper—in fact, he would occasionally take out a pen to circle or underline an item of interest. But he was also spending a lot of time studying the passersby.

From his position near the entrance the man could watch people as they came and went, as they waited in line with their purchases, and as they roamed the store. The man hardly moved his head, but his eyes were in constant motion, never lingering on anything: the page he was reading, the woman in the red coat,

the young man stocking the sunflower seeds, the page he was reading, the little boy whining about wanting a doughnut, the page he was reading, the old guy in the outdated jogging suit, the young couple near the register, the page he was reading, and so on.

The man was looking for something.

Trevor felt an unsettling certainty that the man was looking for him.

He realized how lucky he was that, so far, the man had not appeared to notice him peeking through the packaged fruit pie rack. Had they made eye contact, Trevor was certain the man would have become suspicious.

Trevor chose the blackberry fruit pie and rejoined his mother. He managed to avoid looking in the direction of the man the rest of the time his mother shopped. He did not look at the man while he waited beside his mom in line, or while she paid for the groceries and his fruit pie.

But, unable to resist, on his way out the door, Trevor glanced over at the man on the bench and found the man staring at him. The man's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly. And then Trevor was out the door, helping his mom load bags from the undersized cart into the trunk of their car.

He did not look back at the store.

Deep down, he knew the man was still watching.

Pigeon went through the sliding glass door into his backyard. His dog, Diego, a black Labrador, padded over to him. Pigeon crouched and petted the dog's sleek coat for a moment before jogging around to the side of the house and wheeling his bike through the gate into the front yard. He normally stored his bike in the garage, but had figured that exiting through the side gate would be quieter.

Not that subtlety mattered. His mom was a different person. She no longer asked how his day went. She no longer double-checked the clothes he selected in the morning. She paid no attention to what he ate, when he did his homework, or

whether he brushed his teeth before bed. And she had not asked for the change from the white fudge, so he had kept the extra seventy-nine cents.

His dad had always been low-key, letting Mom fuss over the details. If anything, he was mellower now. Pigeon probably could have driven away in the family minivan and nobody would have noticed or cared.

Pigeon pedaled down Monroe Circle to the creek and found the others waiting on the jogging path astride their bikes. “Everybody made it,” Trevor said. “Good job.”

“You all have your candy?” Nate asked.

The others nodded.

Summer adjusted her backpack. “Did you get the Forty-niner to the graveyard?”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “I stuck the Forty-niner in the trunk of our rental car, then told my mom I was supposed to find the grave of Hanaver Mills as part of a homework assignment.”

“Rental car?” Trevor said. “That’s right. They never found your Explorer, did they?”

“Nope. At least it was insured. Anyhow, my mom bought the story and drove me to the cemetery this afternoon. A lady on duty knew right where the grave was, not far from one of the little roads that wind around in there. Hanaver has a big gravestone.”

“What did you do with the miner?” Pigeon asked.

“I popped the trunk, unwrapped the Forty-niner, and set him behind Hanaver’s gravestone. I did it right in front of my mom and she didn’t even pay attention, no questions, nothing. That guy is heavy to carry by yourself—I couldn’t have gone far. It didn’t look too odd sitting there; I mean, people sometimes leave weird things at graves, not just flowers. It’s a safe bet that nobody will have messed with it by tonight.”

“I hope you’re right,” Summer said.

“You know we aren’t actually going to Hanaver’s grave,” Trevor said.

“Right, but Mrs. White said Margaret Spencer was buried near Hanaver Mills.”

“Let’s get going,” Summer said, starting down the jogging path, heading the opposite direction from Greenway. Pigeon enjoyed the wind in his face, riding through the darkness. Not many houses had lights on at this hour. The night was warm, the stars were bright, and the horizon was beginning to glow with the approach of moonrise.

The path dumped them off at a road called Mayflower Drive before continuing on the other side of the street. They abandoned the path and followed Mayflower for quite a distance. Pigeon’s legs began to burn with exertion, but the others seemed fine, so he kept his mouth shut.

Summer led them onto a road called Skyline Avenue that soon became steep. Pigeon was relieved when Trevor dismounted and started walking his bike up the slope. After taking his time up the hill, by the time they had crested the rise, Pigeon felt ready to ride again.

They turned down another street, Saddle Road, and the cemetery came into view. Pigeon had never visited the Colson Valley Cemetery. A chest-high wall made of stacked, interlocking stones surrounded the graveyard. The graves looked old. He could see a few large tombs, several tall obelisks, a couple of statues, lots of upright headstones, and many flat grave markers lying on the grass. The effect at night was intimidating. It was easy to imagine the place teeming with witches and ghosts.

Summer rode over to the wall and stopped. “The front gates will be closed, so we might as well hop the wall here. Help me with my bike.” Nate and Summer lifted her bike over the top of the wall. Trevor hopped the wall and lowered the bike to the grass on the far side. They passed all the bikes over the wall that way, and then Nate and Summer boosted themselves up and over.

Pigeon placed his palms on the top of the wall like the others had, but could not boost himself high enough to get the upper half of his body draped over the

top. He couldn't kick a leg high enough to hook his foot up there, either. He just kept hopping and panting and scratching up his forearms.

He felt embarrassed when Trevor climbed back over and helped him get on top of the relatively low barrier. Pigeon dropped to the grass on the far side, and Trevor landed beside him a moment later.

"This place is scary at night," Nate said, running his hand along the top of a worn old headstone. In the buttery glow from the rising moon, the fading inscription was legible. "This guy died in 1906. Just about everybody alive now hadn't even been born yet."

"There's lots of old graves," Trevor said.

"Especially on this side of the graveyard," Nate said. "They still have empty land way over that way." He waved a hand in the direction he meant. "The gravestones are more recent over there."

"Where's Hanaver?" Summer asked.

Nate looked around. "Mom and I came in through the front, so I'm a little turned around. Follow me." He started weaving among the shadowy tombstones until he reached a narrow paved road. They continued along the road to an intersection. Nate paused, looking around.

"I know where we are now," Nate said confidently. "I remember that tomb with the angels." He took the road that curved up a gentle slope. As they rounded the bend, Nate started trotting. "There it is," he said, pointing.

The tombstone for Hanaver Mills was as tall as Pigeon, and wider than it was tall. It looked old, but his name remained deeply inscribed in commanding letters. Beneath his name were the years 1821–1893, along with the words "Father—Inventor—Philanthropist."

"What's a philanthropist?" Trevor asked.

"It means he donated money to charities," Pigeon said.

Around the back of the tombstone stood the Forty-niner, looking creepier in

the darkness than he had under the sun. “Did you find Margaret Spencer?” Summer asked.

“I looked around a bit, but didn’t see her,” Nate said. “I figured eight eyes would be better than two. I didn’t want to ask anybody from the cemetery, since we were going to be digging up her grave.”

They fanned out. A few minutes later, Summer called out, down the slope and farther from the road. The others hurried over. Margaret Spencer had a more modest, traditional tombstone—about waist-high, narrow with a rounded top. The inscription had almost weathered away, and a few thin cracks zigzagged across the surface. Her name and the years she lived were barely legible.

“Good eyes,” Nate said. “Let’s go get the Forty-niner.”

Nate and Trevor returned to Hanaver’s headstone and lugged the wooden miner down to the other gravesite. “Should we take the Melting Pot Mixers now?” Pigeon asked.

“Maybe we should wait until we get more of a hole dug,” Summer said. “It might take a while, and the mixers only last an hour.”

“She should have given us more than one each,” Trevor complained.

“We definitely want them on the way home,” Nate said. “I think we should wait. If somebody comes, we can always take them quickly.”

“Except you,” Trevor said. “You’ll be unconscious.”

“Good point,” Nate said. “I better take mine now, just in case.”

Summer unzipped a pocket of her jacket and gave Nate the little ball of chocolate. She passed Melting Pot Mixers to Trevor and Pigeon as well, so they would have one when they needed it. Nate ate his, and after a moment started convulsing. He doubled over. When he stood upright, he looked like a full-blooded Native American. His face was darker, and though some similarities persisted, the transformation had structurally altered his features.

“You guys be lookouts,” Nate said. “I’ll want Trevor to stay by me while I

dig. Stay low. With that moon, people could see us from the road.”

“I want to do the cool part this time,” Summer said. “Not keep watch again.”

“Mrs. White said I’m supposed to work the miner,” Nate reminded her.

“Not digging, that’s no fun either. I want to get the box out of the coffin.”

“Be my guest,” Nate said. “We’ll call you when we get there. Summer, you watch the little road, and Pigeon, you watch the main one. If you see trouble, hoot like an owl.”

“I’m not sure that would fool anybody,” Summer said.

“Just make that the signal if you need one,” Nate replied. “We don’t need something as piercing as the whistle.”

Nate and Trevor huddled into the shadow of the largest tombstone close to the Margaret Spencer gravestone. Summer moved in the direction of the little cemetery road and squatted behind an eight-foot obelisk. Pigeon snuck down the slope toward Saddle Road, taking up position behind a wooden supply shed.

Before long, Pigeon heard the sounds of a shovel penetrating and flinging earth, along with the occasional scrape of metal against stone. The sounds were so quick, they could have come from multiple shovels, but he never actually heard two at once, and Pigeon knew the only digging tools they had were the little shovel and pickax of the Forty-niner.

Pigeon watched the field of tombstones before him, the wall, and the dark road beyond. The rhythmic sounds of digging became hypnotic, but the tension of possible discovery and the eeriness of the setting helped keep him alert. As time passed, he recited the U.S. presidents to himself, first in the order in which they had held office, then alphabetically. Pigeon was starting on vice presidents when he saw a car cruising slowly along Saddle Road, the headlights messing up his night vision. Crawling so that the shed was between him and the road, Pigeon hooted. The sounds of shoveling had already ceased.

Pigeon leaned out, peeking around the side of the shed with half his face. The car had stopped. He was almost certain that it was a police car. Suddenly a bright

light glared in his eyes. Pigeon hid his head behind the shed. A bright beam of light began sweeping the area.

“You behind the shed,” crackled an electronically magnified voice. “Come out with your hands in the air.”

The beam of light returned to the shed. Pigeon popped the ball of chocolate into his mouth, and a moment later his flesh began to ripple. “I saw you, come out from behind the shed. Don’t make me come in after you.”

“Go,” Pigeon heard a low voice urge from up the slope.

The rippling had subsided, leaving Pigeon looking Latino. He stuck a Sweet Tooth in his mouth and stepped out from behind the shed, hands held high. “I’m just a kid,” Pigeon yelled.

“Keep your hands where I can see them and walk slowly to me,” the police officer instructed. Pigeon complied. It was a long walk. The spotlight stayed in his eyes the entire time.

When Pigeon reached the wall, he could see the police officer, a muscular man with short hair and chiseled cheekbones. The officer turned off the spotlight and approached Pigeon holding a bright flashlight, one hand near the gun at his waist. “You aren’t allowed to be in the cemetery after hours,” the police officer told him.

“I have special permission,” Pigeon said, the Sweet Tooth nestled under his tongue.

“Special permission?” the police officer repeated in a tone that implied it was unlikely.

The only lie Pigeon could think of sounded pretty lame, but he had to say something. “I’m doing a service project for Cub Scouts. Weeding graves.”

“Little late for weeding, isn’t it?” the policeman said.

“I have school, and my dad works odd hours,” Pigeon said. “This was the best time. The cemetery people know about it. I have to do this to get my Arrow of

Light.”

The police officer stared at him. “You know, as a kid, I always wanted to be a Cub Scout,” the man said. “Never really knew how to join.”

“Please don’t report this or tell anybody,” Pigeon said. “If they hear from the police, the cemetery people might back out of sponsoring my project.”

The police officer winked. “I think we can keep this one off the record. Keep up the good work. Don’t stay out too late.”

“Thanks for being so understanding,” Pigeon said. “Might not be worth remembering this ever happened.”

“Might not.” The police officer turned, got in his car, and drove off down the road.

Feeling traumatized but relieved, Pigeon retreated to the shed. The noise of digging had already resumed. A Hawaiian girl wearing Summer’s clothes met him at the shed. “What did you tell him?” asked the Hawaiian girl in Summer’s voice.

“I said I was doing a Cub Scout project,” Pigeon said.

“He bought that?” she exclaimed.

“Pretty easily,” Pigeon said. “I was worried at first, but then he just accepted it. Now might be a good time for a victory hula.”

“Am I Hawaiian?” Summer said.

Pigeon nodded. “You should do the hula right now,” he urged.

Summer started waving her arms and shaking her hips. A moment later she quit the dance and swatted him on the arm. “I knew what you were doing and it still sort of caught me off guard,” she said. “Spit that thing out.”

“I don’t want to waste it,” he said. “I should probably keep it in.”

“You’re right,” Summer said.

“You ought to hurry back to your post,” Pigeon suggested.

“Okay,” Summer said. “Good job.” Crouching, she dashed up the slope.

Pigeon grinned.

The last time Nate had tried to dig a hole had been very frustrating. The previous year, he had decided to dig a swimming pool in his grandma’s backyard. He had grabbed both of his grandpa’s shovels—the one with the square head and the one with the head more shaped for scooping—and gone to a patch of ground beyond the lawn where dry weeds were withering. It had been frustrating to discover how much force was required just to jab the head of either shovel even a little ways into the unyielding ground. He ended up driving the head of the shovel just a couple of inches into the dry earth with each thrust and scraping up only a little dirt. There were roots and rocks to slow him down, and a hot sun blazing overhead. He had given up before the pathetic hole was knee-deep.

Inhabiting the Forty-niner made digging a much more satisfying experience. With every thrust, the little shovel sank deep into the earth and came up with an impressive pile of soil. Nate soon found that since he did not feel the exertion of shoveling and never grew tired, he was free to dig as fast as he wanted.

He felt satisfaction watching the hole rapidly deepen and widen, the soil soft as pudding, light as popcorn. Whenever he struck a rock, he levered the blade of the shovel beneath it and flung it out of the way without difficulty. Trevor made suggestions on where to widen the hole and where to throw the dirt, which became increasingly useful as the hole deepened. In the three-foot-tall Forty-niner’s form, it did not take long before Nate could not see out of the hole.

When Trevor saw the police car, he jumped into the hole with the Forty-niner and whispered a breathless warning. After Pigeon sweet-talked the officer, Trevor climbed out, and Nate resumed the excavation.

The hole was about six feet deep when Nate struck something solid. Pitching dirt high over his shoulder, he uncovered the surface of the burial vault. He

created some space on one side of the stone vault, then pantomimed for Trevor to toss in the pickax.

Nate found the line dividing the lid of the vault from the rest of the stone box, and began prying. Bits of stone chipped off under the pressure he exerted. Although he could not feel the strain, several times he wedged the pick into position but failed to raise the lid.

Nate dug more, working his way around the entire vault, creating space for him to chip away at the sealed lid. Finally, after relentlessly attacking the vault from all sides, Nate forced the lid up, got a wooden hand under it, and heaved it aside.

“Good job, Nate,” Trevor applauded.

Inside the stone vault lay a long box of rotten wood. Trevor shone a flashlight at it from above. Nate bashed open the wood with the pickax, tearing away splintery chunks and casting them aside. He glimpsed the remains of a decayed skeleton inside and observed a pale box beside the collapsed skull. Nate waved up at Trevor, who called to Summer in a loud whisper.

A few moments later, Nate saw a Polynesian version of Summer appear, grimacing down into the hole. “Okay, I changed my mind, you get it.” She moved out of view.

Nate retrieved the ivory box from the coffin and scrambled over to the edge of the hole. Trevor climbed partway down the least sheer side of the hole and accepted both the shovel and the rectangular box. Nate slammed the lid back onto the vault, adjusted it as snugly as he could, then used the pickax as a climbing tool to emerge from the hole. Having not exited the hole since commencing the project, he was impressed by the quantity of earth mounded around the gravesite.

“Fill it in and let’s get out of here,” Summer said. “It’s almost two-thirty.”

Nate started with the shovel, but soon he was racing around the perimeter of the hole, hurling in armfuls of soil. He would get low to the ground, spread his arms, churn his legs, and bulldoze sizable piles into the void all at once. Then he would turn around, bend over, and scoop dirt backwards between his legs, arms

pawing tirelessly.

Trevor helped with the shovel, and Summer kicked at the dirt as well, but it was Nate using the Forty-niner to wrestle earth into the hole that got the job done. In the end, the grave looked recessed and grassless. Too much of the dirt had dispersed too widely as Nate had chucked it skyward during his digging. Staring at the grave, they could see how obvious it would be that somebody had dug it up.

Trevor walked over to Summer. “What do we do?” he asked.

She surveyed the area. “Nothing. Had we been thinking, we would have cut out squares of grass at the start, set them aside, and laid them back down now. At least we got the box and pretty much filled in the hole. We better get out of here.”

“Should I wake you up, Nate?” Trevor asked.

The Forty-niner bobbed his head.

Nate felt the rush of wind against his eyeball and was once again back in his own body. He was already back to his original race. Summer remained Polynesian. Trevor had not ingested a Melting Pot Mixer.

Trevor and Nate hauled the Forty-niner back up to Hanaver’s tombstone; then they went and found a Latino Pigeon sleeping beside the supply shed. They woke him up, retrieved their bikes, and rode home.

Clean Slate



Nate stood at the front of Mt. Diablo Elementary, watching from beneath an overhang as rain streaked down, wondering why white sidewalks turned brown when they became wet. A nearby gutter funneled a steady flow of water from the roof. Great pools had formed in the overcrowded parking lot, where kids were trying to leap into cars without dousing their shoes.

The rain had caught him unprepared. There had been a few clouds in the sky when his mom drove him to school. The day had grown overcast by first recess, then the rain began around lunchtime, accompanied by prolonged growls of thunder. Although the thunder had passed, a ceiling of murky clouds stretched to all horizons.

Trevor exited the main office and trotted over to Nate. “My mom is coming,” he said. “She’ll take all of us.”

“At least somebody still has parents,” Nate said. He and Pigeon had both already tried to phone home and reached only voice mail.

“I’m surprised none of our families knew the rain was coming,” Pigeon said. “Plenty of kids brought raincoats and umbrellas.”

“Mrs. White should start printing the forecast on her fudge boxes,” Summer proposed.

Trevor shifted his backpack on his shoulders. “What should we do about the thingy we found?”

The previous night, after returning from the cemetery, they had unfastened the clasp on the ivory box and opened it. Inside, bundled in silky fabric, they found what looked like a little golden spyglass. When they had looked through the spyglass, whatever image they focused on was fractured into fragments, as if someone had inserted kaleidoscope mirrors into a telescope. Upon further examination, they had discovered no other clues in the box, among the silken wrappings, or on the view-warping spyglass.

“We go home, get dressed for the weather, and meet on the path by the Nest,” Nate said.

“I still say we take the telescope apart,” Summer insisted.

“And I still say it isn’t made to dismantle easily,” Nate said. “It seems too fancy, with mirrors or whatever inside—we’ll mess it up.”

Summer crossed her arms. “I don’t want to rely on Mrs. White. I want to see the clues myself.”

“If we could see screws or something we’d give it a try,” Trevor said. “I agree with Nate.”

“Me too,” Pigeon said quietly.

“Okay, have it your way,” Summer relented. “But if Mrs. White claims she found a clue inside the telescope telling us to rob a church, I’m turning in my candy.”

Nate shrugged. He gave Pigeon a playful shove. “I saw you dozing in class,” he said. “Not that Miss Doulin noticed.”

“I couldn’t keep my eyes open for a while there,” Pigeon confessed. “I hope next time Mrs. White gives us an assignment we can do during the day.”

“Have you guys seen Denny or Kyle or Eric?” Summer asked.

“I saw Kyle on my way into school,” Trevor said. “He noticed me and

avoided me. I think we're in the clear with them. Oh, speaking of that, did I tell you guys I saw the dude with the overcoat?"

"No, where?" Summer asked.

"I was at the Colson General Store yesterday with my mom. He was sitting by the entrance reading a paper and keeping an eye on everyone. Mrs. White was right that he's definitely up to something. I forgot to tell you guys last night."

"Did you play it cool?" Nate asked.

"I think so," Trevor said. "But he gave me a look that made me nervous. Hopefully it was just in my head."

They stood listening to the patter of the rain, watching the cars in the parking lot dwindle. Miss Doulin scurried over to her little hatchback without a coat, holding a leather satchel over her head, and entered through the passenger door to avoid the puddle on the other side.

"You guys stranded?" a mellow voice asked from behind them.

They turned. It was Gary Haag, the custodian. Nate had seen him around a few times. He was a thin guy in his early thirties with a wispy mustache and a light brown mullet that dangled to the base of his neck in straggly curls. He wore a denim jacket decorated with images doodled in black ink: a Viking ship, a frowning snowman, a dollar sign made out of cobras, Homer Simpson's head, a snowflake, a scuba diver, a pair of dice, a curved sword, a biplane, an algebra equation, a hamburger. A ring with at least twenty keys dangled from his belt. The odor of cigarettes lingered about him.

"My mom's coming," Trevor said.

"Oh, right on, I was feeling bad for you guys," Gary said, brushing hair out of his eyes. "I was going to find you a ride or something." He looked up at the gray clouds. "You're not dressed to walk home, and that rain ain't letting up anytime soon."

"That's nice of you," Summer said. "We'll be all right."

“How you been doing, Pigeon?” Gary asked.

“Good,” Pigeon said.

“Right on.” Gary stood with his hands on his waist, examining the sky. “You ever wonder if the clouds are really just hiding alien spaceships, like in that movie? I mean, this could be a full-on invasion.”

Nate could think of a few movies Gary might be referencing. “It’s a big storm,” he said to fill the silence.

Gary nodded. “Don’t you wish rain would fall from normal-sized clouds? You know, here and there, a little at a time. You might even be able to get out of the way if you stayed on your toes. But nope, all we get is some megacloud that blankets the whole state. I bet you couldn’t even get out of the way in a Ferrari.”

Nate glanced sideways at Trevor, who raised his eyebrows. Pigeon scratched his scalp. Summer stared at her feet.

Gary let out a prolonged sigh. “Well, I have a bunch of stuff to do.” He jangled his keys. “Going to be a soggy ride home. Hope your mom stashed a life raft in the trunk. Keep it real.” He sauntered away down a covered walkway.

“Is that guy sane?” Nate asked in a low voice.

“Gary’s nice,” Trevor said. “He can be kind of odd. There’s Mom!”

Trevor’s mom was driving along Oak Grove Avenue in a dark blue sedan. She turned into the parking lot and pulled up alongside the curb. Trevor climbed into the front seat, while the others piled in the back. His mom had curly dark hair and a darker complexion than her son. “It’s really coming down,” she said.

“Thanks for picking us up,” Summer said.

“My pleasure,” Trevor’s mom said, pulling out of the parking lot. “Nate, you’re on Monroe?”

“Right,” Nate said.

She wove around a slow-moving pickup. “We all live so close we should carpool in the mornings!”

The wipers were on high mode, pushing away each new bombardment of raindrops an instant after they splattered against the glass. Nate found himself entranced by the motion, and wondered how Trevor’s mom kept her concentration on the road. The sedan splashed through the edge of a huge puddle, sending up an impressive fan of water.

“Awesome,” Trevor said.

They went to Summer’s house first, pulling into an empty driveway. She waved and used a key to let herself in. They returned to Main, hung a right on Greenway, and turned into the Presidential Estates, the rain still pouring. After dropping off Pigeon, they swung around to the other side of the circle and let Nate out.

Simply running from the car to his porch, Nate got surprisingly damp. He did not carry a key, but knew where the hidden spare was tucked away. He tried the knob and found the door unlocked. Nate swiveled and waved, but Trevor’s car was just pulling out of sight.

“Mom?” he called.

“In here,” she answered from the family room.

Nate found her on the couch in front of the television. “Where were you?” he asked. “I tried to call, the rain had us trapped at school.”

“I’m sorry, honey,” she said. “I wasn’t thinking. Looks like you found a ride.”

“Trevor’s mom.”

“I was looking into joining a health club. Did you know I’ve put on six pounds since I started eating your fudge?”

“Maybe you should stop eating it,” Nate said.

“I can’t,” she said, making wide, guilty eyes. “Neither can your dad. Cheryl eats her fair share as well. It’s like we’re stuck in a fanatical fudge phase.”

“Did you join the club?” Nate asked.

“No, they kept pressuring me. They wanted me to sign a two-year contract. So I went and got a few exercise DVDs instead. I got back not five minutes ago.”

“Okay. I’m going to go change. I’m supposed to meet Pigeon.”

“Doing homework?”

“We have an assignment to finish.” Nate rushed upstairs.

As rain pattered against the yellow hood of her raincoat, Summer brooded about the injustice that she had the longest walk to the Nest. Unless the creek was really low, she had to go all the way over to Greenway, up to the jogging path, and back to the bottom of Monroe Circle just to reach their hideout. It was even less fair on a rainy day like today.

Fishing a sealed sandwich bag of Moon Rocks out of her pocket, she decided to take a shortcut. She turned down a side street that granted access to the strip of wilderness along the creek, and squelched through the weeds to where the water was rushing at a much higher level than normal. It would be a long jump, even with a Moon Rock, and if she messed up, she could get swept away. She hesitated, reconsidering the longer route, then decided she was being a sissy and popped a piece of candy into her mouth. Her body swiftly felt lighter.

She had picked a spot where the far bank was only a little higher than the near bank. Crouching, she sprang forward. For a moment, instead of merely jumping, it seemed like she was soaring up into the rainstorm, rising like a superhero, the rain noisy against her coat, but soon she reached the apex of her leap and began curving down toward the far bank. Her galoshes plopped down in the oozy mud.

“Now, that was an incredible jump,” said a familiar voice.

Summer whirled. Denny came out of some bushes wearing a hooded camouflage slicker. He appeared to be alone. “Jump?” Summer said, playing dumb.

“Yeah,” Denny said. “I wanted to see how high the rain had made the creek. Imagine my surprise when I see you walk up to the edge of the water, eat something, and jump across. I mean, a huge jump, like you were flying.”

“You must be seeing things,” Summer said.

“Kind of like how we were seeing things when Eric got all hairy and Kyle was puking root beer? Kind of like how I imagined that I was pinned to the ground by a massive force? What’s going on, Summer?”

Summer pretended to sneeze and spit her Moon Rock into the weeds. Her body grew heavier. “I don’t have time to stand around talking,” she said. “Let’s just say, if I were you, I wouldn’t mess around with us anymore.” She turned and walked away hurriedly.

“Love the threat,” Denny laughed. “Fine, go fly away to play with the magical geek squad. You don’t scare me. I have my eye on you guys.”

Summer did not look back. She kept her pace quick and found the others waiting on the path above the Nest. Trevor and Nate wore hooded ponchos. Pigeon had on a thick winter coat and carried a black umbrella.

Summer bit her lip. Part of her wanted to report what Denny had seen, but she felt too embarrassed that she had been so careless. They already knew Denny was suspicious of them because of the trick candy. She decided there was no need to humiliate herself by sharing what else he had witnessed. “Do you have the telescope?” Summer asked.

“Of course,” Trevor said.

They started down the path together. Summer checked periodically over her shoulder to make sure Denny wasn’t tailing them. It would be easy enough for him to deduce that their candy was coming from Mrs. White without their actually showing him. By the time they reached Greenway, she felt confident that Denny was not on their trail.

The Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe was not as busy as it had been during their previous visit. But considering the rainstorm, there was still a

respectable crowd. The guy with the wine-colored birthmark was helping customers, but the dwarf was not behind the counter today. Instead there was a big, round guy. He had thick, shiny lips, and his cheeks and jowls were bloated with fat. His black eyebrows almost met above his knoblike nose. Pockets of blubber bulged from the backs of his huge hands.

The guy with the birthmark ducked through the batwing doors into the back of the store and returned with Mrs. White, who waved the kids over. She raised the countertop and led them into the back.

Today the rear of the store was immaculate. Everything looked freshly scrubbed, the shelves appeared orderly, and no ingredients cluttered the worktables. “I’m very excited to see what you discovered,” Mrs. White said, taking a seat at the table with the purple covering.

Trevor opened his backpack and placed the ivory box on the table. Mrs. White undid the latch. They had rewrapped the spyglass in the silky material, trying to make it look exactly as they had found it. Mrs. White unfolded the fabric and held up the spyglass, peering into it. “Excellent,” she said, twisting the end of the spyglass. “Well done.”

“What is it?” Nate inquired.

Mrs. White lowered the spyglass. “This is a teleidoscope, undoubtedly fashioned by Hanaver Mills. I expect it will prove useful locating the treasure.”

“Teleidoscope?” Pigeon asked.

“You mean you don’t know?” Nate asked, enjoying the moment.

Pigeon rolled his eyes.

“A teleidoscope is a hybrid between a telescope and a kaleidoscope,” Mrs. White elaborated. “A normal kaleidoscope uses optical trickery to create patterns out of bits of material built into the device. A teleidoscope uses similar optics to reconfigure whatever you point it at. Teleidoscopes work best when aimed at vivid backgrounds—for example, a bright floral arrangement.”

“Is it a clue?” Trevor asked.

“I suspect it is a tool for unlocking a clue,” Mrs. White said, setting the teleidoscope aside.

“Do we get some reward candy?” Nate asked.

“You get a new magical edible to use in completing a new assignment. While I strive to unravel the secret of the teleidoscope, I have a new mission of some urgency for the four of you.”

“Do we have to do it at night?” Pigeon sighed.

“Nighttime would probably be best, but you can wait until the weekend.” Mrs. White held up a grainy gray cube. “As you know, most of my confections work best on children. But a few function equally well on adults, like the white fudge. Interestingly, adults tend to remain most susceptible to magic that dulls their senses and reduces their vision. This masterful creation exploits that weakness, wiping out the memory of anyone who ingests it.”

“Like amnesia?” Nate asked.

“Total amnesia,” Mrs. White said. “Those who consume it retain their language abilities, but lose all the specifics of their identity. They start again with a clean slate, which is where the substance derives its name. Since the effects are permanent, and each Clean Slate is indescribably difficult to produce, I do not administer it lightly.”

“You want us to erase somebody’s memory?” Summer verified.

“A villainous man,” Mrs. White affirmed. “An enemy to me and to all humanity. Letting him start again with a clean slate will be a service to him and to the world.”

“What makes him evil?” Summer asked. “Is he after your treasure?”

“He is after the treasure, and would do terrible things with the power it would grant,” Mrs. White said. “Whether or not I succeed in finding the treasure, he must be stopped. We need to get him to voluntarily consume the Clean Slate. If we try to force it upon him, the magic will fail. The Clean Slate dissolves almost

instantly into any liquid, so I will need you to sneak into his house and taint a drink in his refrigerator.”

“That sounds really dangerous,” Summer said. “Who is he?”

“I’ll tell you once you agree to the assignment,” Mrs. White said.

“Can you prove that he’s evil?” Summer challenged.

Mrs. White pressed her lips together for a moment before regaining a look of calm. “This relationship requires trust,” Mrs. White said. “I trust you with candy so powerful that most grown, responsible adults would misuse it. You trust me that the assignments I select are in our best interest. Otherwise we should end the relationship.”

“You can’t just expect us to blindly do whatever you say,” Summer said. “You have to earn trust. How do we know you won’t misuse the treasure as much as this other guy? We earn your trust by fulfilling the tasks you give us. Can’t you give us some proof to earn ours?”

All eyes were on Mrs. White. “If I had evidence, I would share it. All I have is knowledge and experience. I could tell you stories about this man, but I have no tangible proof to show you.”

“Can we see the note on the back of the watch face?” Summer asked.

“Now you doubt that?” Mrs. White asked. “You found the teleidoscope right where the note described!”

“Can we see the note?” Summer repeated.

“If there is no trust in this relationship, perhaps you should turn in your candy,” Mrs. White said.

“My dad says people who insist that you trust them usually don’t deserve it,” Summer said. “You don’t need to give me more candy, but I earned the candy that I have. Everything you’ve had us do so far has seemed shady, and this new assignment is the shadiest yet. I just don’t trust you.” Summer looked at her three friends. “Any of you guys coming with me?”

“I am,” Pigeon said. “You probably have good intentions, Mrs. White, and your candy is amazing and fun, but I’m not cut out for this sort of stuff. I don’t have all my candy with me, but I can bring it back if you want.”

“Summer has a point, you earned the candy that you have,” Mrs. White conceded. “You can keep your share, as long as you use it in secret, and stay out of the treasure hunt. How about you, Nate? Trevor?”

Nate cleared his throat. “I’ll keep working for you,” he said.

“Me too,” Trevor agreed. “Sorry, Summer.”

“It’s okay, you guys can do whatever you want.” She felt tears welling up in her eyes. “I better go. Come on, Pidge.” They started walking away.

“Are you certain?” Mrs. White asked. Summer and Pigeon paused, listening. “There is no coming back if you walk away now. You’ll miss many of my most amazing candies. You haven’t even seen Creature Crackers!”

“We’re sure,” Pigeon said. He and Summer passed through the batwing doors to the front of the store. She continued holding back the tears.

“You were really brave in there,” Pigeon said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“Was I?” she said, her voice catching. “Or was I a chicken?”

They stepped out into the rain.

“It’s hard to stand up to somebody like Mrs. White,” Pigeon said. “I wanted to before the graveyard mission, but I didn’t have the guts. I wanted to again this time, but who knows if I would have without you.”

“Well, the adventure is over for us,” she said. “No more treasure hunt, no more candy.”

“I think I’ve had enough treasure hunting,” Pigeon said. “We can still have some fun with the candy we have left.”

They hurried across the rain-glossed asphalt of Greenway.

“I hope Nate and Trevor know what they’re doing,” Summer said.

“I sort of doubt it,” Pigeon sighed.

Nate felt bad as he watched Summer go. She had looked truly hurt when he and Trevor chose not to side with her. He wished he could explain. What Summer had asked of Mrs. White had sounded really reasonable to him. Mrs. White’s evasive responses had made him even more suspicious of her. Which meant it was even more important to keep working for her until he figured out what she was really doing.

“Shame they didn’t want to trust us,” Mrs. White said, shaking her head. “You boys sure you don’t want to follow them out?”

“I’m sure,” Nate said.

Trevor nodded.

Mrs. White narrowed her eyes. “I could tell you two were made of tougher stuff than those others. As we close in on our goal, things will be heating up. I need to know I can rely on you boys to the bitter end.”

“You can,” Trevor promised.

“Very well,” Mrs. White said. “The man whose mind we must erase is a magician like me, but has lived here in town a bit longer. His name is Sebastian Stott.”

“Mr. Stott, the ice cream man?” Trevor blurted.

“The very same,” Mrs. White said. “You may have noticed him out on his route again. He would do anything to lay his hands on the treasure we are seeking.”

“But he’s so nice!” Trevor exclaimed.

Mrs. White shook her head knowingly. “Believe me, he’ll be a lot nicer if we let him start over with a new memory.”

Trevor looked to Nate. Using the table to shield the action, Nate nudged Trevor with his foot. Whatever they ended up actually doing, they had to play along for now.

“Will the Clean Slate work on a magician?” Nate asked.

“It will work on anyone unless forced upon them,” Mrs. White said.

“So, what’s the plan?” Nate asked.

“Sneaking into his home will require some ingenuity,” Mrs. White said. “We magicians lay down protective spells to guard our abodes. But I know a way to bypass his defenses, an arcane technique that he would never expect. Mirror walking.”

“What’s that?” Trevor asked.

“Most of those who still know of this secret believe it has been lost over the passage of time.” Mrs. White held up a tiny blue mint. “Put this in your mouth, bite down hard, and for a moment you will be able to step through a looking glass into the space inhabited by reflections.”

“Like *Alice in Wonderland*?” Nate asked.

“Not like Alice,” Mrs. White said. “You will become a living reflection capable of dwelling in the darkness that unites all reflected space. No walls exist in the void between mirrors, no substance except floors. The feat of magic that either discovered or created this space is nothing I can take credit for. But I do know how to access it. You can pass through the blackness from one mirror to another, and gain entry to forbidden places.”

“Weird,” Trevor said. “That’s how you want us to get into Mr. Stott’s house?”

“I have done some investigating, and I know he has a mirror large enough. None suspect that this secret art endures. You’ll need only take a mirror near his house, climb inside, pass through his walls in the darkness, enter his bathroom

through the mirror, deposit the Clean Slate in his milk or his juice, and then exit through the mirror.”

“Once we’re in, can’t we just go out the door?” Nate asked.

“Open no window or door,” Mrs. White warned. “Do not explore his home. Go from the bathroom to the kitchen and back.”

“What if he finds us?” Trevor asked.

“Don’t let him find you,” Mrs. White said. “If he does, run away. If you’re caught, play dumb. But be careful and you won’t get caught. Strike late Friday or Saturday. Be sure the house is dark. Or I suppose you could sneak in during the day if you’re sure he’s off driving his route. I’ll leave the timing up to you. Each Mirror Mint gets one person through one mirror. You’ll pass through a mirror to get into the darkness of the reflected world, and through another to get out. Should you get stuck in the reflected world without a mint, you could become trapped for all eternity.”

“Eventually we’d die,” Nate said.

Mrs. White shook her head. “Not true. You would stop aging, no longer require food or air, and persist as a living reflection until the last mirror in the universe was destroyed.”

“So be careful with the mints,” Trevor said.

“Most careful,” Mrs. White agreed, handing each of them four. “Two for each of you to get into his house, and two to get out. I imagine you’ll want to stay together, although it might be wiser to enter solo, leaving the other guarding the mirror outside.”

“Together is better,” Trevor said. “It would be too freaky alone. We’ll hide the outside mirror.”

“Who wants to take charge of the Clean Slate?” she asked, holding up the gray cube.

Nate accepted it. “How do we find our way if the mirror world is dark?” he

asked.

“The mirrors are all you can see in the blackness,” Mrs. White said. “You can peer out of them like windows. But no light shines in through them. It can be disorienting—with no walls, you can see mirrors a long ways off.” From under the table Mrs. White lifted a large oval mirror in a frame. “This should be large enough for you to fit through. The closer you place it to Mr. Stott’s house, the closer you will be to his bathroom mirror. I suggest you set up really close to minimize the distance you’ll have to traverse in the dark.”

“Can we get in through a window?” Nate asked. “Windows sometimes have reflections.”

“Most reflections in windows or water are too faint to connect to the mirror realm,” Mrs. White explained.

“Should we use Melting Pot Mixers?” Trevor asked.

“The Mixers will do you no good if Mr. Stott catches you,” Mrs. White said. “Your only option on this mission is to avoid getting apprehended.”

“Where does Mr. Stott live?” Trevor asked.

“1512 Limerick Court,” she said. “Just off Greenway, between here and your school.”

“Do you have blueprints of his house?” Nate asked.

“No need,” Mrs. White said. “Go through the big mirror in his guest bathroom. Don’t confuse it with the small mirror in the bathroom adjoining his bedroom. The guest bathroom opens onto a hall. Walking away from the bedroom doors, pass through the living room and into the kitchen. I’ll wrap up this mirror so you can take it now. Any other questions?”

Nate and Trevor looked at each other. Nate shrugged.

“I think we’ve got it,” Trevor said.

“One more thing,” Mrs. White said. “Until our treasure hunt concludes, I would prefer that you limit your exposure to Summer and Pigeon. Put those

friendships on hold for a week or two. All right?”

Nate and Trevor nodded.

“Good boys.”

Ice Cream Man



Heather Poulson passed a folded note to Nate, not even bothering to be sneaky about it. Miss Doulin stood at the front of the room reading aloud from a textbook, having obviously not prepared an actual lesson. Seeing his name printed in blue ink, Nate unfolded the torn slip of lined paper and read the single question it posed:

You don't actually trust her, do you?

Nate looked at Summer in her desk near the front on the far side of the room. She did not look back at him. They had not talked all morning. He had caught her once giving him a sad, pensive stare.

Tearing part of a page from his notebook and uncapping his black pen, Nate wrote:

I'm not an idiot. Trust me. (Even though I have no proof ha-ha)

He folded the paper, wrote "Summer" on it, and handed it to Heather. The note traveled to the corner of the room where Summer sat. She scanned the message, shook her head, tore a fresh piece of paper, and began writing. Her reply was passed to Nate and he opened it.

I do trust you, you're my friend, no joke. I'm worried about you. The candy is fun, but that lady is hiding something. I think she's dangerous. Don't you?

This note was on a larger piece of paper, leaving space for him to reply. When

he started writing, he noticed that his script appeared small and cramped compared to her loopier style.

Of course she's dangerous! I only stayed so I could keep an eye on her a little longer. She doesn't want us hanging out with you and Pigeon anymore. We'll have to meet in secret. I don't even think we should eat lunch together—she seems to have some way of knowing things. Trevor and I have some surprising info. I don't want to write it down.

He crossed out his name as the addressee, wrote hers, and sent the folded paper back to Summer. After she read his words, she gave him a look to ask, “Then what do we do?”

Nate leaned over to Heather. “Hey, Heather, trade seats with Summer.”

“I’ll get busted,” she whispered.

“I don’t think Miss Doulin will care,” Nate said.

“She might.”

“Never mind,” Nate said. He got up and walked across the back of the classroom, then up the row to Summer’s desk. Miss Doulin continued to read aloud. He squatted beside Summer. “She wants us to erase Mr. Stott’s memory,” he whispered.

“The ice cream man?” Summer sounded shocked.

“She says he’s a magician like her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’re not going to do it,” Nate said. “We’ve agreed on that much already. We’re still trying to decide our next move.”

“Go talk to Mr. Stott,” Summer said. “Spill your guts and see what he has to say. Maybe he can help.”

“Or maybe he really is worse than she is,” Nate said.

“Even if he is a bad guy, he’ll be glad you brought the info to him,” Summer said. “He can at least help you figure out what the heck is really going on. If you’re not going to use the Clean Slate on him, you can’t keep working for Mrs. White. And she may not take it well if you quit now. You’ll probably need help dealing with her.”

“I guess talking to Stott is the only real option,” Nate admitted. “We can’t just do nothing.”

“You might be able to try quitting like me and Pigeon,” Summer considered. “Just return all the candy and walk away. But with what she told you about Mr. Stott, you may know too much.”

“Plus if we quit and try to pretend like none of this happened, we won’t be able to learn any more info,” he said. “I have to find out what is going on. Mr. Stott lives at 1512 Limerick Court, just off Greenway on the way home. If you want to come, meet us there tonight at eleven.”

“I’ll be there. Mr. Stott has been driving that truck around since I can remember. He’s always acted genuinely nice. I bet he’s one of the good guys.”

“I hope so,” Nate said, glancing at Miss Doulin, who continued reading from the textbook. “One more strange thing. Yesterday evening, after Trevor and I left Sweet Tooth, I had my mom drive me to the cemetery. I told her it was a follow-up visit for my project, but really I wanted to pick up the Forty-niner.”

“Was he there?”

“Yeah, that wasn’t the strange part. While we were nearby, I took a look at Margaret Spencer’s grave. It looked untouched, with grass over it and everything.”

“No,” Summer said.

“I’m serious. And I don’t mean maybe all the rain somehow made it look a little better. The grave looked untouched. Somebody covered our tracks for us, maybe with magic, maybe with gardening, I don’t know. My guess is Mrs. White did it. But weird, huh?”

“Very weird.”

“See you tonight.”

Nate headed back to his seat, winking at Pigeon.

“Nate?” Miss Doulin asked. “What are you doing?”

He looked over at her, a little surprised that the teacher had glanced up from her reading and noticed him crossing the room. “Can I use the rest room?” Nate asked.

“Um, sure, go ahead.” Miss Doulin returned her gaze to the textbook. “Where were we? Ah, yes.” She started reading aloud again.

The house at 1512 Limerick Court was a boxy, one-story home made of wood and white brick. A small detached garage stood at the end of the short driveway. Quirky items cluttered the yard: a sculpture made of bicycle wheels, an inflatable Elvis, an aluminum totem pole, a miniature windmill with rotating sails, a giant ceramic boot with flowers sprouting out the top, along with other more conventional eccentricities like wind chimes, bird feeders, lawn gnomes, and pink flamingos. A low chain-link fence enclosed the front yard, with a gate providing access to the brick walkway that led to the porch.

As Nate and Trevor straddled their bikes in front of the gate, only one of the house’s large, rectangular windows was illuminated—a window at the right end of the squat structure, with the blinds closed. The asphalt under their tires was almost dry. The rain had tapered off during the day. Patches of stars peeked through the clouds overhead.

“Think Summer and Pigeon will show?” Trevor asked.

“Summer at least,” Nate said.

“I don’t like standing here on the street,” Trevor said. “Somebody might see us.”

Nate inclined his head toward the door. "Should we go knock?"

"We don't need to all enter together," Trevor said, reaching to open the gate.

"You have those Frost Bites ready just in case?" Nate asked.

Trevor nodded. "You have the Shock Bits?"

"Yep," Nate said. "Think he might have a dog?"

Trevor rattled the gate gently and whistled. No animal responded. "All clear," Trevor said, opening the gate and wheeling his bike through. They left their bikes propped against the inside of the low fence and walked to the front door. Artificial turf blanketed the porch. A terra-cotta Buddha sat near the door, along with a painted statue of a cheetah. Nate pulled open the screen door and knocked. When the house remained quiet, Trevor pressed the lighted doorbell. They heard it chime a few notes from "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head."

Illumination brightened a new window, and a moment later they heard locks being unfastened. The door opened halfway. Mr. Stott was wearing flannel pajamas with fat maroon and cream stripes. He squinted at them. "Tracked me down at home, did you?" he said. "Little late for a fruit bar."

"We aren't here to buy treats," Nate promised.

"I remember Trevor, and you're Nate, correct?" Mr. Stott said.

"Right," Nate said. "We're here about Mrs. White. She has plans to harm you."

Mr. Stott's demeanor transformed instantly. His cranky half-smile drooped into a somber frown. His eyes flicked back and forth between them. "You mean by driving me out of business?"

"We mean by using magic against you," Trevor clarified.

Mr. Stott nodded, stroking his beard. "Then you had better come inside," he invited, stepping out of the way and pulling the door open wider.

"Trevor, Nate," came an urgent whisper from behind them.

Nate turned and saw Pigeon and Summer pulling up at the gate on their bikes. "They're with us," Trevor explained as he stepped across the threshold.

Pigeon and Summer parked their bikes and hurried through the doorway. Mr. Stott closed the door.

Nate and Trevor went into the living room and plopped down on a black leather sofa. A fanned-out assortment of peacock feathers decorated one wall. A print showing Easter Island statues hung on another, stone heads staring mysteriously. Several issues of *Log Home Living* magazine rested on a glass and chrome coffee table. A tall, unlit lava lamp occupied one corner. A few pedestals stood around the room, each topped by one or two little telescopes locked into position by some kind of holder.

Summer and Pigeon sat on an elaborately carved loveseat. Mr. Stott claimed a large armchair upholstered in cowhide, adding to the ridiculousness of his striped pajamas. He leaned forward intently. "You say you are aware of a plot by Belinda White?"

"Is that her name?" Summer asked. "Belinda?"

"The name she is using here in Colson," Mr. Stott said.

"She wanted Trevor and me to use something she called a Clean Slate to erase your memory," Nate said. "She told us that you were an evil man."

Mr. Stott nodded, pinching the whiskers immediately below his lips. "I've heard rumors that she could concoct a powerful amnesiac. How did she expect to administer it?"

"She wanted Nate and me to come into your house using mirrors and mix the Clean Slate into a drink in your fridge," Trevor said.

"Using mirrors?" Mr. Stott asked dubiously.

"She said we would turn into reflections and be able to travel through walls," Nate said.

"I had no idea that technique had survived," Mr. Stott marveled. "How sloppy

of me! Tell me, why are you sharing this information?”

“We didn’t want to do it,” Trevor said.

“We got involved with Mrs. White because she was giving us magic candy,” Nate explained. “She would have us do little tasks, and then reward us with more candy. We could jump around like we were in low gravity, we could shock people, we could control dolls with our minds—”

“But the stuff she was asking us to do seemed fishy,” Summer interjected. “We gave fudge to our parents that made them distracted and forgetful. We stole from the town museum. We dug up a grave.”

“We wanted to figure out what she was up to,” Nate said. “But we drew the line at erasing your memory.”

“For which I’m most grateful,” Mr. Stott said. “With that mirror technique you might have succeeded. What have you learned about her master plan?”

“We know she is here looking for a treasure,” Pigeon said. “We know she wants it because it will increase her powers. She says you are looking for it as well. She somehow knows a lot about what is going on in town. We’re not sure why she involves kids in her work, or whether she really is as dangerous as we worry she might be.”

Mr. Stott folded his hands. “I appreciate you laying your cards on the table,” he said. “I will try to be equally forthright. Mrs. White is more treacherous than you can guess. We are both magicians, but she has one of the most notorious and bloody histories of any member of our order. She craves power, and has never hesitated to lie, cheat, steal, or kill to get it.”

“Are you dangerous too?” Pigeon asked.

Mr. Stott shifted in his chair. “I can be, I suppose. No magician is really safe, to himself or to others. Many of us are hermits, who mostly want to be left alone as we pursue our studies. Some have altruistic intentions; others are entirely selfish. We all generally try to maintain a low profile. A few of us take on the responsibility of policing those who attempt to blatantly use magic for sinister ends, or who operate too openly and risk revealing the long-guarded secret of

our existence.”

“Are you one of the policemen?” Nate asked.

“In a limited capacity, yes,” Mr. Stott said. “However, I am not one of those who dedicate all their time to such matters. Belinda concerns me. I am aware of the treasure she is seeking—it is part of the reason I took up residence in this town years ago.”

“What is the treasure?” Summer asked.

Mr. Stott stroked the furry length of his beard. “None know for certain. We have only rumors. Supposedly it is a talisman of significant magical power, worthy of remaining concealed these long centuries. I came here as a guardian rather than a treasure seeker. I did not want Belinda or others of her mind-set to lay hands on an item of such terrible power. But now I fear the only way to stop her and those like her may be to locate the treasure myself.”

“And what would stop you from using it for bad purposes?” Summer asked. “Mrs. White makes the same claims about you as you make about her.”

“No magician would trust another with a talisman such as this,” Mr. Stott acknowledged. “Least of all Belinda White. But I have lived quietly for hundreds of years. In bygone days, I have inhabited seats of power and prestige, and such honor long ago lost its savor. I have lived in Colson for years, not searching for the treasure, but delivering ice cream to schoolchildren in a rundown truck. I would gladly leave the treasure hidden away if Belinda were not hot on the trail. If I gained the treasure, I would store it and protect it from others who might abuse it.”

“I don’t get why Mrs. White involved us,” Pigeon said.

“That has as much to do with the nature of the magic we practice as it does with her greed,” Mr. Stott said. “You see, magic functions much more potently on the young. Part of the paradox of becoming a magician is that by the time you know enough to manipulate magic, you are too old to use it to your full advantage. Mrs. White can engineer sweets that grant great power to the young, but those same miraculous confections would have little effect were she to use them herself.”

“Why not use magic to make yourselves younger?” Pigeon asked.

Mr. Stott spread his hands. “We do what we can. Taking away years from a person is nearly impossible. Adding them is much easier. As magicians, about the best we can do is try to maintain our current age. We can’t quite stop the aging process, but we can slow it considerably. That is how magicians like Belinda and myself survive for so many years.”

“So Mrs. White just wanted us for our youth, because her candy would work well on us?” Nate restated.

“Basically, yes,” Mr. Stott said. “Undoubtedly she believed that you four were especially bright and capable. She must have been monitoring your achievements—she would not have entrusted you with an assignment like erasing my memory unless she truly believed in your abilities. But make no mistake about it, you were being used.”

“What should we do now?” Trevor asked.

Mr. Stott rose and began pacing. “That is the question of the hour. By coming to me and disclosing your assignment, you have placed yourselves in extreme jeopardy. If Belinda learns you have betrayed her, your very lives could be in peril. As I see it, you have three options. You could pretend that your attempt to erase my memory failed and continue working for her. You could resign from her service immediately, never speak of any of this to anyone, and hope for the best. Or you could try to beat her at her own game and get to the treasure ahead of her. Any of those choices is risky.”

“Pigeon and I resigned yesterday when she started explaining this assignment,” Summer said.

“We’re mainly here for moral support,” Pigeon added.

“Trevor and I were only staying with her in order to figure out what she was up to,” Nate said. “We don’t want to keep helping her.”

“I want to beat her to the treasure,” Trevor said.

“Is that realistic?” Summer asked.

“Depends,” Mr. Stott said, pacing with his hands behind his back. “How much do you know?”

“We helped her steal a pocket watch that belonged to her ancestor Hanaver Mills,” Nate said.

One side of Mr. Stott’s mouth curved up into half a smile. “She said Hanaver Mills was her ancestor? Belinda White was making magical candy when Hanaver Mills was in diapers.”

“Supposedly the watch contained a clue revealing that an important object was buried with Hanaver Mills,” Pigeon said. “The clue indicated that Hanaver Mills was actually buried under a grave marker for Margaret Spencer, who died the same year. We dug up the grave and found a teleidoscope.”

Mr. Stott stopped pacing and faced Pigeon. “A teleidoscope? Where is it now?”

“She has it,” Summer said.

Mr. Stott shook his head slowly, wearing his lopsided grin again. He fingered the telescope on top of one of the pedestals. “Do you know what this is?” he asked.

“A teleidoscope?” Nate ventured.

“I collect them,” Mr. Stott said. “Artisans create high-end teleidoscopes that sell for thousands of dollars. Those in this room function almost like kaleidoscopes, in that the teleidoscope is locked into a fixed position aimed at a certain target. This teleidoscope points at a stone ball with water trickling over it. The ball slowly turns, and the flowing water ensures that the pattern the teleidoscope observes is never quite the same twice. Feel free to look.”

As the kids took turns gazing into the eyepiece and turning the wheel to rearrange the pattern, Mr. Stott crossed to a different teleidoscope, switching on a light behind it. “For this teleidoscope, you dip this hoop into this soapy solution.” He pulled a lever that immersed a circle of wire into a shallow

reservoir. When he raised it, the hoop had a glossy film stretched across it, as if for blowing a huge bubble. “Take a look,” he offered.

Nate peered into the teleidoscope and beheld a brightly animated pattern. Twisting the end of the teleidoscope, he made the pattern dance. “It looks like a cartoon,” he said.

“Just the soapy film with the light behind it,” Mr. Stott affirmed.

Nate stole one more peek before allowing the others a turn. They had to dip the wire hoop again each time the film broke.

“Come with me,” Mr. Stott said. He led them down a hall to a bedroom dominated by a big four-poster, complete with canopy and curtains. On a nightstand sat a small platform fashioned out of pink granite, with a single vacant mounting for a teleidoscope. Trevor, Summer, Pigeon, and Nate gathered around it.

“This base was designed and built by Hanaver Mills,” Mr. Stott said. “He left it to me in his will. He was not a relative, but we were friends. A teleidoscope is meant to point at this surface.” He indicated a smooth surface speckled with variegated flecks opposite the empty mounting. “Hanaver told me that the right teleidoscope would reveal a message hidden in the stone.”

“You think we found the teleidoscope?” Pigeon said.

“It was this base that instigated my teleidoscope collection,” Mr. Stott said. “After inheriting the platform, I tracked down several teleidoscopes attributed to Hanaver Mills. None revealed a message. I also experimented with teleidoscopes made by a variety of random craftsmen, hoping to get lucky. Again, success eluded me. I suspect Mrs. White now possesses the teleidoscope I have been seeking all these years, a vital clue to locating the treasure. I have kept this base a closely guarded secret, but perhaps she somehow learned of it. That might explain why she would want my mind erased.”

“She didn’t mention anything about the base to us,” Nate said. “But that doesn’t mean you’re wrong.”

“How does she know so much?” Trevor asked. “Does she sneak around at

night?”

“I see that Belinda has not explained much about herself,” Mr. Stott chuckled. “A magician cannot leave his or her lair. The lair is empowered with magical defenses and spells that keep them safe and postpone their aging. If Belinda abandoned her lair to snoop around, she would become a pile of bones in no time.”

“But what about your ice cream truck?” Pigeon asked.

“Part of my lair,” Mr. Stott said. “Although making a vehicle part of my lair creates certain vulnerabilities, to me the added mobility justifies the risk. Magicians can journey from lair to lair, setting up new abodes as needed, traveling in temporary lairs, but a price of the lives we lead is that we surrender the ability to move about freely.”

“You’re saying Mrs. White lives at Sweet Tooth?” Pigeon asked.

“Most assuredly,” Mr. Stott said.

“Then how does she know so much?” Trevor asked again.

“Belinda has always employed henchmen,” Mr. Stott said. “Most of us also have a trick or two that allows us to personally spy on the outside world. Which is why I worry about you kids. There is no way to be sure where Belinda is looking, or when. You must be most cautious.”

“What are the chances of us stealing the teleidoscope from Mrs. White?” Nate asked.

Mr. Stott frowned. “It would be very difficult. Her lair will be well-guarded by spells.”

“What if we use her Mirror Mints against her?” Nate suggested.

Mr. Stott’s eyebrows knitted together. “I’m sure she keeps no mirrors in her lair large enough for anyone to gain access that way, since she is aware that the secret of mirror travel endures.”

“What if we planted a mirror inside the candy shop?” Nate proposed.

Mr. Stott scratched his hairy cheek. "Possible," he said, eyes lost in thought. "If I could get my hands on that teleidoscope, we just might beat her to the treasure. Once we acquire the treasure, she'll start preparing to leave town the next day. She'll have no more interest in Colson, California. And if she tried anything foolish out of spite, I would have the means to protect you."

"Maybe we should go for it," Trevor said.

"Yeah," Nate said. "I'd rather take action than wait around for her to punish us."

"I can't advise you to try this," Mr. Stott said. "It is too bold. But . . . if you insisted on taking the risk, your advantage would come from the fact that Belinda probably thinks her candy shop is invulnerable. Our lairs are designed to keep intruders out. If you can discover a way in, you may not find many obstacles between you and your goal."

"She probably just keeps it stashed under that table in her workshop," Trevor said.

"On the outside chance you were daring enough to attempt such an inadvisable mission, you would probably need to do it before you were supposed to wipe my memory," Mr. Stott said. "When you fail to complete that assignment, her guard will be up."

"Good point," Nate said.

Mr. Stott put his hands behind his back and stood up straight. "Of course, this could all be an elaborate ruse by Belinda to ferret out what I know. If it is, well done, you utterly fooled me. I have laid my cards on the table. Please keep this information private. There are many others besides Belinda White who would try to destroy me simply to lay their hands on this teleidoscope base." He rubbed the pink marble platform.

"We won't blab," Summer said.

"Having heard your news, I should eliminate all mirrors from my home," Mr. Stott said. "Whether she has been peeking through windows, or having spies use

mirror travel, Belinda will probably notice if I do that, so I will wait for a few days while you figure things out. Would you like my telephone number?"

"Yes," Nate said.

Mr. Stott opened a drawer and withdrew four business cards, handing one to each of the kids. His address and telephone number were on one side. On the other, they read:

Sebastian Stott

The Candy Wagon

Homemade and Brand Name

Ice Cream · Frozen Treats · Candy

Nate pocketed his card as Mr. Stott led them toward the front door. "Feel free to contact me if you need anything," he said. He opened the door.

"Thanks, Mr. Stott," Pigeon said.

"Thank you again for the warning," Mr. Stott said. "I'm quite fond of my identity."

They filed out the door. Nate exited last. "You'll hear from us again," Nate promised.

Mr. Stott winked. "I hope so."

Mirror Mints



Summer and Pigeon crouched beside a white cake box on the jogging path about twenty paces from Greenway Avenue. Summer had purchased a mint-chocolate-chip ice cream cake from the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe earlier that afternoon using money from the little yellow safe on her bedroom shelf. The cake now resided in her freezer, bundled in plastic wrap. The point had not been to get a cake. The point had been to acquire the box.

A round mirror rested on the bottom of the box, the reflective side facing down. The diameter of the mirror was almost too great to fit, even though the box had held quite a large cake.

Pigeon had furnished the mirror. In the bathroom that he shared with his younger sisters, a round medicine cabinet hung on the wall. Up until that afternoon, the mirror had served as the front of the cabinet. Now the cabinet had no front, exposing narrow shelves stocked with bandages, bottles, and dissolving tablets. Pigeon had no idea how long it would be before his parents noticed, but he was much less worried about it than he would have been a week ago.

Summer and Pigeon each uncapped a tube of super glue purchased at the Colson General Store. They squeezed the colorless, gelatinous glue all over the back of the mirror, closed the lid of the box, picked it up, and hastened down the path to Greenway.

It was Friday evening, and the line of customers at the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe wrapped halfway around the outside of the building. Cars jammed the parking lot and lined the curbs of Greenway and Main.

Summer and Pigeon skipped the line and pushed their way through the front door with the cake box. All of the tables inside were occupied, with many patrons standing around nibbling at various sweets, but an older couple was just standing up from a square table not far from the door. Summer and Pigeon rushed over and claimed the table before the couple had cleared their napkins.

Summer positioned herself to at least partially impede a view of Pigeon from the counter. Setting the cake box on his lap, Pigeon opened the top, removed the mirror, and pressed it up against the underside of the table. He held the mirror firmly in place, fingers splayed against the glass, and slowly counted to thirty. The glue was supposed to work instantly, but he wanted to be safe. He kept an eye on the customers standing or sitting near him, but none seemed to be paying any attention to his actions. Carefully he reduced the pressure of his hands against the glass until he was no longer supporting the mirror.

Pigeon gave Summer a curt nod. He glanced beyond her at the counter, manned by the big round man, the guy with the birthmark, and the dwarf. They looked harried as they took requests, filled orders, and made change, and gave no sign of having noticed him or Summer. Toting the cake box, Pigeon and Summer dodged around the line at the doors and fled the store.

The clock radio came to life playing one of the five or six songs that seemed to be incessantly on the air lately, and Trevor pawed at it, slapping the snooze button. His mattress felt deep and soft and his pillow was bunched just right. How long did the snooze button last? Seven minutes? Nine?

He pushed himself away from the mattress. That was the danger of keeping the alarm clock within arm's reach of the bed—the snooze button was too tempting. But he had wanted the alarm nearby so he could shut it off quickly. White fudge or no white fudge, he didn't want to press his luck by awakening his parents. The green digital numbers read 2:16 a.m.

Trevor put on his shoes and a lightweight jacket. All his clothes were dark. Grabbing his private stash of Moon Rocks, Shock Bits, Frost Bites, and Mirror Mints, he went downstairs. He sucked a few sips of water from the faucet in the kitchen, then exited through the front door, leaving it unlocked.

He reached the jogging path first and sat down to wait. Hopefully Nate would be sufficiently excited to get himself out of bed. Pigeon had called to report that the mirror was in place.

Trevor saw Nate walking down the street and waved. Nate waved back. He was carrying the mirror that Mrs. White had given them. Trevor got up. "You ready?" Nate asked as he approached.

"I'm freaked out," Trevor said.

"In and out," Nate said. "Hopefully it will only take a minute."

"You have your candy?" Trevor asked.

"I'm all set," Nate said.

They started down the path. "She's going to flip out when she finds the teleidoscope missing," Trevor said.

"We'll have to watch our backs."

"If we pull this off smooth enough, Mrs. White may not even know we did it. I mean, if the teleidoscope just seems to have vanished, with all the different people who are hunting for the treasure, who knows who she might suspect?"

"Good point," Nate said. "We'll have to try to play it cool."

"I left several lights on in my house, in case we need to retreat to our homes inside the mirror realm," Trevor said. "I never realized how many mirrors we had."

"I left my bathroom light on for the same reason," Nate said. "Most houses will be dark, so I hoped I would be able to find the bright mirror."

Trevor tapped the mirror that Nate was holding. "Dressed in black in the middle of the night, we look like we stole that mirror."

"Nobody will see us," Nate said. "We walk along the path, we cross Greenway, and we're there."

The night was dark and silent as they reached Greenway. No cars on the street, no cars in the candy shop parking lot, no people. Trevor and Nate trotted across the street and knelt behind a low hedge that bordered the parking lot.

“Let’s lean the mirror here,” Nate said, propping it against the hedge so that it faced a narrow alley between the candy shop parking lot and another building.

“I guess this is as good a place as any,” Trevor said. “You have four mints?”

Nate counted them out. “One to get into the mirror, one to get out, another to get in, another to get out. Should we do it?”

“Sure.”

“Who goes first?”

“I have the flashlight,” Trevor said. He stuffed all his candy in his pockets and placed a Mirror Mint on his tongue. He tapped his knuckles against the surface of the mirror and it rippled, making his reflection undulate. When he pressed his palm against the glass, it flexed inward, wavering less as he stretched it. He bit down on the mint, and his hand passed through the surface of the mirror as if it were the surface of a pond. He wiggled his fingers. The space beyond the mirror felt much colder than the night air.

Switching on the flashlight, Trevor crawled through the mirror into the darkness. Although the dark space beyond the mirror was bitterly cold, he did not shiver or get goose bumps. Before him, at different heights and in all directions, a multitude of rectangles and ovals interrupted the darkness, the vast majority small and far away. Most were so dim that they were visible only because everything else was perfectly black.

Turning back to face the mirror he had just crawled through, Trevor found himself staring out at Nate, illuminated by the pinkish glow of streetlights. Although he could see Nate fine, none of the light spilled through to brighten the darkness. Trevor waved, and Nate waved back. Nate put a mint in his mouth and entered, the glass rippling as he passed through. As soon as he moved beyond the mirror, his body lost all color and was visible only as a silhouette against the dim background of the alley.

“Welcome to Wonderland,” Trevor said.

“Is your flashlight on?” Nate asked.

“Yep,” Trevor said. “I don’t think light shines here.”

“We can see the mirrors,” Nate said. “Light has to be reaching our eyes.”

“Sure, but it doesn’t brighten anything—not us, not the ground, not even the emptiness.”

“Maybe there’s nothing to shine on,” Nate said. “We’re reflections now, which sort of means we’re nothing.”

“You saw me wave, right?” Trevor said.

“Sure. But look, I put my arm right next to the mirror, and absolutely no light hits it. I bet reflections are only visible from outside a mirror.”

Trevor reached out and touched Nate’s arm. “At least I can feel you. And I can see your outline when you’re in front of the mirror.”

“Touch the ground,” Nate suggested.

Trevor crouched and ran his hand over the hard, smooth surface. “It’s like glass.”

“It certainly isn’t dirt or asphalt,” Nate said. “Nothing is quite real here, not the ground, not even the cold.”

“Isn’t the cold weird?” Trevor agreed. “You feel it, but it doesn’t really get to you, it doesn’t penetrate.”

“That’s what I mean,” Nate said. “Nothing here is real. We better get going. I can see how people could get lost in here.”

“If we walk directly away from this mirror, we should be inside the candy shop in about twenty steps,” Trevor said. He placed his hand against the mirror, which from his current perspective looked like a window. “Let me test

something.” He gradually pushed harder and harder. “The mirror won’t budge.”

“I’m telling you, I think we’re close to being nothing in here,” Nate said. “We may be just about the only things in here that can think or move or talk or make a silhouette. It creeps me out.”

They started taking hesitant steps away from the mirror. “If it’s dark inside the candy shop, we may have a hard time spotting the way in.”

“We’ll find the mirror,” Nate assured him. “It has to be brighter than total blackness!”

“I keep thinking I’m going to run into something,” Trevor said.

“There’s nothing to run into! No walls, no objects, just ground.”

“What if I run into the back side of a mirror?” Trevor wondered.

“I guess that’s possible,” Nate said.

They continued forward. Trevor could not shake the worry that he might whack his face against something in the darkness, but it kept not happening. He paused and looked back at the mirror through which they had entered. “I think we’re inside the candy shop by now,” he said.

Nate gave no answer. “Nate?” Trevor asked. “Nate?” he repeated more urgently.

Nate exhaled loudly. “Sorry,” he said. “Try holding your breath. You never run out of air. It seems like you will, but the point where you actually need to take another breath never comes.”

Trevor held his breath. Nate was right, it felt normal at first, like his oxygen was running out and soon he would need to exhale and gulp down fresh air. But the moment of true desperation never came. “It’s like if we didn’t have the habit, we wouldn’t need to breathe at all.”

“Find your pulse,” Nate said.

Trevor felt his wrist, sliding his fingers around, searching for that spot a bit

off-center where the pulse was strong. He could not find it. He tried his neck instead, where it was usually easier to find his heartbeat, again to no avail. Finally he pressed his hand against his chest. Nothing. “No pulse?”

“No pulse,” Nate confirmed. “Our hearts don’t need to beat, we breathe only out of habit . . . no wonder Mrs. White said we could get trapped in here forever.”

“This is definitely not the place I want to spend forever,” Trevor said.

“Window shopping until the end of time,” Nate said. “Roaming from mirror to mirror like a ghost.”

They were talking fairly quietly, but Trevor lowered his voice even more. “You don’t think our voices are carrying through the mirrors, do you?”

“I doubt it,” Nate whispered. “But we should probably be careful, just in case.”

Trevor spotted a less black circle floating in the darkness at about the height of his waist. “Do you see that?” Trevor asked.

“What?”

“Over here. Follow my voice.”

“Oh, genius, good eyes, that has to be it.”

Leaning over the circle, about the size of a medium pizza, Trevor could faintly discern the white and black checkered pattern of the candy shop floor. He could also make out some chrome table legs and chair legs. Trevor placed a hand on the circle. “Feels solid. How should we go through?”

“Stand on it,” Nate recommended. “Then you’ll land on your feet instead of on your head.”

“Think it will hold me?”

“I think we’re nothing right now. It will hold nothing.”

“Come help me balance,” Trevor said. Laying a hand on Nate’s shoulder, he got one knee up onto the circle, then lifted his opposite foot, and in a moment he was standing on the dim disk. “Should I go for it?”

“You didn’t see any sign of anybody?”

“Just our moms trying to break in and steal fudge,” Trevor said.

Nate chuckled.

“It looked quiet and dark,” Trevor continued. “I think the only light was trickling in through the windows from the street.”

“Then go for it,” Nate said.

Trevor pulled a mint from his pocket and put it in his mouth. The circle became elastic, like he was on a trampoline. Biting down, he instantly dropped through the circle to the tile floor. Raising his arms over his head, Trevor ducked down, worming the rest of himself through the round opening. There was not much room to spare, but he fit. He scooted out of the way so Nate could drop through.

Trevor had almost forgotten that he was holding his flashlight, until he saw it actually penetrating the darkness of the candy shop. The beam landed on a withered old man wearing a long feathered headdress, making Trevor feel a brief surge of panic before he recognized the figure as the wooden Indian. He switched the light off.

Sneakers slapped down against the tile floor as Nate dropped through the mirror. To Trevor it looked like a moment from a magic show—a pair of legs wearing jeans sticking out from the bottom of the table with nothing visible above it. It would make a pretty good stage trick.

Nate shimmied the rest of the way through the mirror, then crab-walked out from under the table. “I can hardly see,” Nate whispered so quietly that Trevor could barely hear him.

“Should I turn on the flashlight?” Trevor whispered back.

“Better than stumbling and making a ton of noise,” Nate said.

Trevor clicked on the light. After how busy the candy shop had been lately, it was peculiar to see it empty. Nobody behind the counter, no patrons. Everything still and silent, with candy everywhere for the taking. “Where should we look first?” Trevor asked.

“In the back,” Nate said. “Let’s try that table where Mrs. White always sits.”

After ducking under the hinged segment of the counter, they went through the batwing doors into the rear of the store. The worktables were messy, covered with various candy projects in different stages of development. On one table an oily black snake lay coiled in a cage, on another rested a fancy jade urn, on a third slouched a sack spilling burgundy powder.

Trevor shone the flashlight beam onto the table with the purple tablecloth. Nate hurried over, knelt, and lifted the tablecloth to look underneath. “Nothing,” Nate growled.

“Not so loud,” Trevor reminded him.

The two of them meticulously navigated the room, the flashlight beam slowly sweeping the shelves and worktables. They checked inside crates, boxes, barrels, and jars. They looked inside a spacious closet, a cramped rest room, and behind a door marked Private that led to a long staircase. They even investigated the cage with the snake.

“What now?” Nate asked in frustration, after the final cupboard yielded no teleidoscope.

“What’s up the stairs?” Trevor asked.

“It’s probably where Mrs. White lives,” Nate said.

“Do we dare?” Trevor asked.

“If the teleidoscope isn’t down here, it’s probably up there,” Nate said.

Trevor sighed. “After we leave, we’ll have no more Mirror Mints. This is our only shot at this. Keep those Shock Bits handy.”

Nate followed Trevor over to the door with the black and gold Private sign. They opened it, and Trevor shone his flashlight up the long staircase. Treading lightly, they took the stairs one at a time, tense, ready to retreat if necessary. A couple of times a step creaked, and they paused, waiting, listening, trying not to breathe.

At last they reached the top of the stairway and found a plain brown door with a peephole. Trevor placed a hand on the doorknob and slowly turned it. "It's open," he mouthed to Nate with wide eyes.

Nate motioned for him to open it further.

Switching the flashlight off, Trevor eased the door open. The room beyond was dark. Stepping through the doorway, Trevor felt thick carpeting beneath his shoes. Nate slipped in behind him. They left the door ajar.

Trevor held up a hand for Nate to wait. He could hear the sound of something large breathing. He moved his mouth near Nate's ear and whispered, "You hear that?"

"Yes," Nate whispered back.

Trevor cupped a hand over the end of the flashlight and turned it on. His fingers glowed red, and just enough light escaped to reveal the big, round man lying sideways on the couch, mouth gaping, heavy chest rising and falling rhythmically, huge head cushioned on one fleshy arm. He wore a white undershirt, and a blue knit blanket covered him.

The room was large, with two couches, two armchairs, an entertainment unit, and several bookcases crowded with old books and glass figurines. The entrance to a hallway yawned at one end of the room. Trevor crept away from the hallway, passing the couch, moving into the adjoining dining room and kitchen. He scanned the china cabinet and the tidy counters.

A pocket door in the dining room was shut. Trevor pushed the door sideways and it slid into the wall, revealing a roomy study designed around an impressive wooden desk. Trevor uncovered the end of the flashlight, allowing the beam to shine brightly. Nate pointed at the desk. Trevor saw the pocket watch resting

alongside a leather-bound copy of *The Collected Reflections of Hanaver Mills*.

“She took the book,” Nate whispered.

“Still no teleidoscope,” Trevor replied.

Nate tiptoed into the room and tried the desk drawers, sliding them open and closed with extraordinary care. When he opened the third one, he froze, then pulled out the teleidoscope, pumping his fist in silent triumph. Trevor motioned for them to go, once again dimming the flashlight with his hand. Nate picked up the book as well, following Trevor back into the dining room.

The instant Nate passed through the doorway, a blast of sound like a hundred trumpets blared for a solid three seconds. The unexpected clamor startled Trevor so much that he dropped his flashlight. Crouching to retrieve it, he saw that Nate had dropped the book, which Trevor grabbed as well.

Their ears ringing from the explosion of sound, Trevor and Nate hurried toward the front room, but stopped short when they found the big, round man on his feet, facing them, his hair matted and disheveled. He had just turned on a lamp. In his undershirt and athletic shorts, his tremendous girth was on display. From his rotund torso to his elephantine limbs, blubber deformed his body. He was tall, a few inches beyond six feet, and nearly as wide, an obese hill of a man with a grouchy head on top.

“This isn’t what it looks like,” Nate said.

The big man opened his mouth, those thick, shiny lips spreading wide, as if to take a bite from a towering sandwich. His chest convulsed, and out shot an orange glob of jelly nearly the size of a grapefruit. The glistening projectile splattered against Trevor’s shoulder, about half of it continuing past him to slap the wall. The orange ooze on his shoulder writhed, shapelessly climbing toward his neck, moving like an amoeba. Shouting, Trevor wiped at the nightmare spitball, orange jelly squishing between his fingers.

The man fired another orange glob of similar size at Nate, who avoided it by diving behind the dining-room table. Having wiped away most of the ooze, Trevor joined Nate behind the table, fumbling in his pocket for the Frost Bites. Nate was also digging in his pocket.

Mouth still gaping, the big man walked toward them. Instead of expelling another glob of ooze, he sent a vast quantity of orange jelly gushing from his mouth like water from a fire hose. The stream of jelly collected on the table in a vivid, translucent mound, enough orange ooze to overflow a bathtub. The gooey pile quivered, stretched taller, and then surged off the tabletop, enveloping Nate.

Trevor scrambled away from the table back into the study, tearing open the baggie with his Frost Bites inside. Nate looked like he was drowning in orange gelatin. Only his head and one arm remained outside the rippling ooze. The big man was approaching the table, looking considerably thinner, loose skin sagging, orange jelly no longer pouring from his lips.

Trevor popped two Frost Bites into his mouth. It was his first time sampling the candy. They tasted like vanilla yogurt. For a moment he felt an intense chill sweep over him, and then his body went numb.

The translucent gelatin now totally surrounded Nate. Trevor saw his encased friend move one hand to his mouth, followed instantly by a bright flash. The electrical burst liquefied the jelly, which slopped all around him to form a dull orange pool.

Placing his palm to his mouth again, Nate arose, sparks crackling between his fingers. The pool of liquefied jelly began to flow toward the big man, who stayed on the far side of the table from Nate.

“Run to the kitchen!” Trevor called, charging the big man. Nate retreated to the kitchen, dodging around the counter. The big man backpedaled into the front room. As Trevor neared the liquefied pool, it froze solid, taking on a frosted sheen.

The big man opened his mouth and coughed a jellyball at Trevor. The sphere struck him in the chest and sent him spinning to the ground. His numbness prevented him from feeling the pain, but he heard ribs snap. It took Trevor a moment to realize that the coldness had frozen the jellyball, causing it to bash him instead of splatter.

As the big man inhaled to launch another jellyball, Trevor spit out his Frost Bites. Instantly the numbness vanished and a sharp pain blossomed in the left

side of his chest. The next jellyball splashed against his forehead, soaking his hair. "Nate!" Trevor called, crawling away as the big man advanced, another jellyball slapping wetly against his back, the gelatin on his head squirming against his scalp.

Nate raced out of the kitchen, arms raised threateningly, electricity sparking from his fingertips. The big man faced Nate and spit out a glob of jelly the size of a golf ball. There was a flash as the glob struck Nate, and the tiny ball turned to liquid.

"He's shorting out my charge," Nate yelled, slapping more Shock Bits into his mouth just in time for another undersized jellyball to waste his electricity. "I don't have many Shock Bits left!"

Trevor was now crawling on slick, frozen ooze. It vibrated beneath his hands and knees. Having spit out the Frost Bites, he could feel that the temperature in the apartment had lowered significantly. His breath visibly condensed in front of his face. What were his weapons? He had Moon Rocks, a couple of Mirror Mints, some Shock Bits, and his Frost Bites. "I can't do Frost Bites!" Trevor warned, reaching for his Shock Bits. "Those balls of goo turn hard as a rock!"

"I dropped the scope," Nate said. "Snag it."

Glancing under the table, Trevor could see the teleidoscope lying on the far side, where the jelly had enveloped Nate. Trevor lunged under the table, sprawling on frozen ooze, ribs aching, and grabbed it.

"Surrender now and we may show you leniency," the big man said, cheeks drooping, baggy skin sagging from his bare arms and legs. He was considerably less rotund.

Nate stood with a handful of Shock Bits ready. "I'll eat these the second before I touch him," Nate said. "Follow me."

Trevor was back on his feet, teleidoscope in hand. Nate rushed the big guy, who ran right at him vomiting a blinding stream of orange jelly. Before Nate could get the Shock Bits into his mouth, the big guy caught hold of his wrists, continuing to expel ooze from his mouth. Pulsating gelatin cocooned Nate for the second time.

Trevor ran at them, teleidoscope in one hand, Shock Bits in the other. The instant before he reached them, Trevor slapped the Shock Bits into his mouth and sprang. His outstretched hand touched the gelatin, and with a flash like lightning, the ooze liquefied, the big man went tumbling, and Nate was hurled into the wall.

Ribs smarting, Trevor got another dose of Shock Bits ready and approached the big man, who was shakily rising, his body grotesquely deflated, a skeleton wearing skin ten sizes too big. Orange liquid ran toward the freakish man across the floor, as if the apartment were tilting in his direction. Just before reaching him, Trevor ate more Shock Bits, a larger dose than he had ever tried, and swatted the man on the shoulder. A blazing flash and a crack like a gunshot sent the man soaring into the entertainment unit, scattering DVDs and overturning the television.

Nate was on his feet and running for the front door. Trevor followed him, his last dose of Shock Bits ready in his palm. “Hold it!” ordered a voice that sounded like it had inhaled helium.

Trevor turned and saw the blond dwarf with the flat top crouched in the middle of the hall that led away from the front room, hands balled into fists. He wore a dark blue tank top and gray sweatpants. A white glimmer flickered about him, gradually intensifying. He had a look on his face like he was trying to lay an egg. Since the dwarf was not moving, and Trevor was almost to the door, he refrained from eating his final dose of Shock Bits.

The dwarf sprang, streaking toward Trevor as if he had been shot from a cannon, slamming into him with stunning force. Searing pain erupted in Trevor’s ribs. The teleidoscope flew out of Trevor’s hand, as did the Shock Bits, and he crashed to the ground with the dwarf’s strong arms wrapped around his torso.

The teleidoscope rolled forward across the carpeting. Standing in the doorway, Nate picked it up. “Run!” Trevor gasped.

Nate shoved a handful of Shock Bits into his mouth, and a glob of orange jelly splashed into him, accompanied by a flash. “That’s all I have!” Nate cried.

“Run!” Trevor repeated, clinging to the dwarf, trying to give Nate a chance.

Nate disappeared from the doorway. Trevor heard his feet thumping down the stairs. The feisty dwarf wrenched himself free and chased after him. The big man shambled over and collapsed onto Trevor, blanketing him with mushy loose skin. The man seized Trevor's wrists, pinning them to the ground at either side of his head.

"Your luck just ran out," the big man said. His breath reminded Trevor of a rotten jack-o-lantern his family had once kept on the porch too long.

Trevor bucked and struggled but, even deflated, the big man was too strong. Orange liquid began to slither over Trevor, warm and syrupy. The liquid streamed up the big man's arms and flowed into his gaping mouth. Trevor closed his eyes.

"Trevor, Trevor, Trevor," said a familiar, grandmotherly voice tinged with regret. "I could not be more disappointed." Trevor opened his eyes. Mrs. White stood above him wearing a lavender robe with lace embellishing the neck. She shook her head sadly. "I had so hoped to spare you from the horrors of my dark side."

Costly Clues



Nate knew that without any more Shock Bits, he would get caught along with Trevor. Which would mean the teleidoscope would remain in the hands of Mrs. White and her sideshow henchmen. But if he managed to get away with the teleidoscope, he might be able to enlist help from Mr. Stott in defeating Mrs. White. Maybe they could even use the teleidoscope as leverage to bargain for Trevor's release.

Mind racing, Nate dashed down the stairs. In his peripheral vision, he had seen the blond dwarf streak across the room. Like the big man full of jelly, the little man had some sort of magical power. Nate debated whether he should try to get out through the mirror, through a door, or through a window. He could recall no windows in the workroom, just as he had seen no windows in the apartment. Wasn't there a back door someplace?

In answer to his question, he saw the back door at the bottom of the staircase, opposite the door to the workroom. Skipping the last five steps, Nate landed heavily, grabbed the knob, and found it locked. The door had a deadbolt that he could release, but the knob had a keyhole. He rammed the door with his shoulder but it felt sturdy, and he heard footfalls at the top of the stairs, so Nate switched tactics and charged through the door into the dark workroom. Running blindly with his free hand extended, he glanced off tables and stumbled over stools.

In the midst of his panic, he tried to strategize. Mr. Stott had warned them to exit through the mirror. The old magician had expressed concern about the spells that guarded the lair. But wasn't that just if they were trying to be stealthy? Would those spells actually harm him on his way out, or simply raise an alarm?

His understanding was that the spells were in place mainly to prevent people from entering.

Could the dwarf use Mirror Mints? What about the big guy? Where was the dude with the huge birthmark? Was he a roommate as well? Nate realized that if he could just get through the mirror, even if somebody chased him, he could run as far as he wanted and get lost in the darkness. Then he could eventually exit through some random mirror anywhere in town. If he escaped the store through a window or a door, he might get zapped by some spell, and the dwarf might follow him out onto the street. He had seen the dwarf fly at Trevor only out of the corner of his eye, but had glimpsed enough to know that the little guy had some sort of ability to attack at great speed.

The flood of thoughts and questions was interrupted when Nate heard the door open behind him. Fluorescent lights flickered on overhead. Focused on reaching the mirror, Nate burst through the batwing doors and vaulted the counter, holding the teleidoscope high as he tumbled to the floor on the far side.

Regaining his feet, Nate raced toward his destination. He fumbled in his pocket to find a Mirror Mint. Sliding to his knees at the table with the mirror underneath, Nate finally glanced back. He saw the dwarf perched atop the counter, holding a chair that he must have brought from the back room, his body crouched and contorted. Shimmering light gathered around him.

Worried that the dwarf was about to take flight, Nate fell flat. A fraction of a second later, the dwarf uncoiled in a ferocious motion, hurling the chair with superhuman force. The chair flew too quickly to be anything but a blur, but Nate felt it whoosh past above him, and heard it collide violently with the table. The table flipped end over end, and the chair sailed through one of the plate-glass windows facing Main Street. As the window disintegrated, there came a tremendous blast of sound, like the horn of an ocean liner, accompanied by a fiery surge of light and heat.

The way the table had landed, Nate could see that the mirror on the underside had shattered. The gaping window through which the chair had passed was his next best option. Nate sprinted in a crouch, trading the Mirror Mint in his hand for a Moon Rock. He leaped through the huge square hole where the window had been, broken glass clinking and crunching underfoot.

Slipping the Moon Rock into his mouth, gripping the teleidoscope tightly, Nate jumped away from the candy shop with all of his might. His feet had hardly left the sidewalk when a powerful force slammed into him from behind, carrying him across the street low and fast, two bodies spiraling through the air until the dwarf hit the ground first and they rolled to a stop on the narrow front lawn of an antique store.

Thrashing to escape the dwarf's tenacious embrace, Nate heard a car screech to a halt nearby, and headlights suddenly glared at him. He heard a car door slam, and the dwarf released him. Having somehow maintained the teleidoscope in his grasp, Nate jumped, gliding considerably higher than the eaves of the antique store roof before curving back down to land on the shingles. Just before he landed, he heard a gunshot.

Head down, Nate took a low hop to the far side of the roof. Adding to the momentum of the gentle hop, he leaped hard, ascending over the small parking lot behind the antique store and rustling through leaves and twigs before grasping a half-glimpsed limb. Pulling on the limb and letting go, he drifted to a higher branch. Pushing off, he turned and wrapped his arms around the trunk of the tall tree. Not wanting to gain more altitude, Nate kicked off the trunk, floating sideways through a gap in the branches, arcing down and alighting on the weedy back lawn of a one-story home. His next jump put him on the roof of the house, and the next deposited him on the sidewalk out front.

He was now on Greenway, not far from the street where Mr. Stott lived. After the disaster at the candy shop, he wanted to deliver the teleidoscope immediately to the old magician. Nate cleared the street with a single spring, then glided up to a roof. Most of the houses in this neighborhood were one-story, and the yards were narrow, so Nate was able to jump from rooftop to rooftop most of the way to 1512 Limerick Court.

From the roof of a home neighboring Mr. Stott's, Nate leapt to the roof of the free-standing garage, then into the front yard, landing beside a turtle fashioned out of wire. All of the windows were dark. Nate spat out the Moon Rock and rushed over to the window that had been lit the first time they had visited Mr. Stott. He beat on the glass. A moment later a light came on and the blinds parted, revealing a pair of eyes. Nate held up the teleidoscope.

The blinds snapped back together, and Nate met Mr. Stott at the front door.

Today his pajamas were plaid with a matching nightcap. “You got it?” he asked in wonder, stepping aside to let Nate enter.

“She caught Trevor,” Nate said, coming inside.

“Oh, no,” Mr. Stott said.

“I barely escaped,” Nate said, his voice catching. “I was out of Shock Bits. I had to either run or get caught too.” Tears stung his eyes. He clenched his jaw.

“You did the right thing,” Mr. Stott said.

“Will he . . . be okay?” Nate asked.

“He was no longer fighting?”

“No, he was done.”

Mr. Stott nodded. “Anything can happen during a fight, but if Belinda subdued him, she won’t kill him. Losing the teleidoscope is a major blow; she’ll want to use Trevor as a bargaining chip.”

“Can we trade the teleidoscope for Trevor?”

Mr. Stott cocked his head slightly. “Without the base, it would do her little good. If she suspects I have the base, she may want more than the teleidoscope. But first things first. Shall we see if it actually reveals a clue?”

Nate gave a nod.

Mr. Stott led the way to his bedroom, crossed to the little marble platform beside his bed, and placed the teleidoscope in the mounting. It fit perfectly. He bent over and began turning a wheel on the teleidoscope. Nate waited, hoping the sacrifice had not been wasted.

“Mrs. White also had a book written by Hanaver Mills that she got from the museum,” Nate said. “We had it, but we lost it in the fight.”

“You brought the most important item,” Mr. Stott said.

Mr. Stott quit peering through the teleidoscope for a moment and turned on the rest of the lights in the room, then returned to his task, slowly fingering the wheel, one eye closed. Nate folded his arms. He paced. He thought about Trevor, wondering whether Mrs. White was hurting him.

Mr. Stott backed away from the teleidoscope. “Without touching a thing, tell me if you see words.”

Nate crouched and gazed into the eyepiece. The message was faint, written in sparse gold flecks mingling with the other colors, the letters warped but unmistakable:

HOLDS

THE

KEY

“Holds the key?” Nate said. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I assume there’s more,” Mr. Stott said. Nate moved out of the way, and Mr. Stott resumed his position. He began turning the wheel backwards in such small increments that the motion reminded Nate of the minute hand on a clock. Patiently Mr. Stott nudged the wheel, studied the image for several seconds, and then nudged the wheel again.

“Aha!” he finally exclaimed, stepping aside. “What do you see now?”

It took Nate a moment to recognize the words, faintly inscribed in blue specks against a brilliant background of tie-dyed sunbursts, the letters highly stylized:

HOUSE

OF

HAAG

“House of Haag?” Nate said.

“Tougher to spot that one,” Mr. Stott chuckled. “Not an endeavor for the

color-blind. House of Haag holds the key.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I need to research the Haag family,” Mr. Stott said. “I know there are numerous Haags here in town. The family has been well-represented in Colson for many years, no doubt dating back to the days of Hanaver Mills. This is a major breakthrough. The key to accessing the treasure must be a Haag family heirloom. They probably don’t even know what it does.” Mr. Stott hunched over the teleidoscope and began to delicately turn the wheel again.

“You think there’s more?” Nate asked.

“If there are two messages, there may be ten,” Mr. Stott said. “We must be thorough.”

Nate sat on the edge of Mr. Stott’s mattress, not really expecting Mr. Stott to find anything else. “Mrs. White has a dwarf who can jump super far and throw things really hard,” he said. “He tackled me out in front of the candy shop and practically broke my back. We landed on the other side of the street. Then somebody showed up in a car, and the dwarf let me go. I heard a gunshot.”

“Did you see who was in the car?” Mr. Stott asked, his voice remote as he concentrated on the image in the teleidoscope.

“No, it was dark and I was scared of getting my head blown off. I just ran, well, glided, to your house.”

“Probably wise. Some rival of Belinda’s must have been keeping an eye on the shop, awaiting an opportunity. I wonder who else is in town.”

Nate leaned back on the bed, which made him realize how tired he was. “She has this other guy, a big fat dude, who was barfing orange goop at us. It was so disgusting.”

“Here we go,” Mr. Stott said. “Have a peek.”

Nate sat up and slid off the bed. This was the faintest image yet, convoluted letters formed by glittering silver particles:

MAP

IN

SHIP

“Map in ship,” Nate read. “How did he set up all these messages?”

“A remarkable feat,” Mr. Stott acknowledged. “Even if, as I suspect, he was something of a magician himself. I have never come across a mirror system quite like the one in this teleidoscope, with some deliberate imperfections built into it. I honestly can’t guess how he pulled it off, especially with such subtlety.”

“What does the clue mean?”

Mr. Stott put his eye to the teleidoscope again, coaxing the wheel forward little by little. “Locating a map would be a serious coup,” Mr. Stott said. “The first half of the battle is learning where the treasure is hidden. After that, we can try to figure out how to acquire it.”

Nate yawned. He knew it was important, but standing around and staring into a teleidoscope was not exactly keeping his adrenalin pumping.

“Success!” Mr. Stott finally reported. “Have a look.”

The next words were formed by black specks against a psychedelic backdrop:

USS

STAR

GAZER

“The map is aboard the USS *Stargazer*?” Nate postulated.

“A reasonable guess,” Mr. Stott said. “Let me keep looking.”

Nate sat on the floor while Mr. Stott continued to nudge the wheel, scrutinizing each new kaleidoscopic vista. Nate leaned back. The floor felt

comfortable. He thought about climbing onto the bed.

The next thing he knew, Mr. Stott was gently shaking his shoulder. Nate blinked blearily. “Find something?” Nate asked, trying to sound awake.

“Nothing new,” Mr. Stott said. “I cycled back through all the four messages twice, using different lighting schemes. I think we’ve found all we’re going to get, but I’ll check again in the morning with fresh eyes.”

“I guess I should get going,” Nate said.

“Let me give you a lift in the truck,” Mr. Stott offered. “You’ve had a traumatic night.”

Mr. Stott led him out of a door in the kitchen and down three concrete steps to the driveway. He manually raised the garage door and went to the driver’s seat of his truck. Nate climbed in the passenger door. “I suppose we can dispense with the music tonight,” Mr. Stott said. “Four a.m. is a trifle early for ice cream sandwiches.”

Nate snapped on his seatbelt. Mr. Stott pulled out of his driveway. “Tell me where you live, Nate.”

“On Monroe in the Presidential Estates.”

“Near Trevor and Pigeon,” Mr. Stott said, nodding. “How about we avoid Greenway and go up the back way, on Mayflower? My guess is you’ve seen enough of the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe for one night.”

“Yes, please,” Nate agreed.

“Now that you made your move, I’ll have to remove my bathroom mirror,” Mr. Stott said. “Can’t give Belinda a chance to retaliate that way.”

“Good idea,” Nate replied.

They drove in silence for a moment. Nate felt unsettled. He kept expecting a car to close in behind them. They rounded a corner onto Mayflower.

“Don’t worry about Trevor,” Mr. Stott said. “That teleidoscope was the real

deal. I'll start working on those clues, and we'll figure out a way to get him back."

"How?"

"The way I see it, we don't want to give away the clues until we follow up on them, find the map and the key. Then we can exchange the teleidoscope and the base for Trevor without handing Belinda the treasure. For all of our sakes, we must prevent her from gaining the power she seeks. That woman has a long memory."

"Think she might come after me?" Nate said.

"Belinda is not rash," Mr. Stott said, turning into the Presidential Estates from Mayflower. "More likely she'll spy on you, try to confirm the location of the teleidoscope before making a move. Since you no longer have the teleidoscope, that should work to our advantage. Try to relax. I'll get in touch when I know more. I expect I'll have a mission or two for you and your friends to perform before this is over."

"Do you have magic candy too?" Nate asked.

Mr. Stott winked. "I may not hand out power as readily as some, but I've been crafting enchantments for at least as long as Belinda. I've got a trick or two up my sleeve, never you fear. For now, hang on to this cell phone. I programmed in my number. I'll be in touch soon."

Nate accepted the phone. "What's your address?" Mr. Stott asked.

"3473," Nate said. "Up here on the left."

The ice cream truck pulled to a stop, brakes squeaking. "Get some sleep," Mr. Stott said.

"Thanks for the ride," Nate replied, hopping out of the truck and shutting the door.

Mr. Stott pulled away, and Nate went into his house. He had left the front door unlocked. He walked up the stairs to the bathroom, closed the door, sat on the

edge of the bathtub, and cried. Once he got going, he found himself overwhelmed by violent sobs. It had all been so terrible, abandoning his friend to an unknown fate, almost getting captured himself. He wished he had never heard of Mrs. White or her magic candy.

He pulled himself together and used some toilet paper to blow his nose. This was far from over—he needed to keep his head. He used the toilet, and then washed his hands. After turning off the faucet, while shaking droplets from his fingers, he saw a face in the mirror.

A face besides his own.

The surprise made him gasp and jump back.

It was Trevor.

Nate spun, checking the room. Trevor was not in the bathroom with him. But he was in the mirror.

Nate turned to the mirror and waved. Trevor waved back, smiling wanly. He looked just as real as Nate's reflection. Who knew how he had escaped? All that mattered was that he had! Nate motioned for Trevor to come through the mirror.

Trevor shook his head, holding up empty hands.

Nate frowned. He dug the two remaining Mirror Mints out of his pocket and pointed at one.

Trevor shook his head.

“No mint?” Nate whispered.

“No mint,” Trevor mouthed. If he had spoken the words out loud, Nate could not hear him.

Nate held up a finger and ran to his room. He opened his backpack and removed a notebook and a pen. Returning to the bathroom, he wrote:

She stranded you in there without a mint?

Trevor nodded.

I only have two. One gets me in, and the other only gets one of us out.

Trevor nodded, apparently having already worked that out.

You came straight to my bathroom once Mrs. White trapped you?

Trevor pointed to himself, then steepled his fingers to form a roof.

You went to your house first?

Trevor nodded, pumping his arms to convey that he had run there.

Did she hurt you?

He scrunched his face and turned one hand from side to side, indicating that she had hurt him somewhat.

Nate wrote quickly, his handwriting even less legible than usual.

The scope worked. We have clues. We're going to bargain to get you out of there.

Trevor held up both hands, fingers crossed.

Are you okay?

Trevor shrugged and gave a slight nod.

Do these letters look backwards?

Trevor shook his head.

Nate had to think about that one. The reflected words looked backwards to him. But Trevor was not looking at a reflection, he was looking at the actual paper, as if through a window. That made sense.

I'm sorry I left you. I panicked. I thought I'd get captured too.

Trevor stuck his thumbs up. Then he pantomimed as if he were looking through a telescope and gave a thumbs-up again.

We'll get you out. I promise.

Trevor nodded and winked. They stood there staring at each other awkwardly for a moment. How could Trevor be so close and so far away? Trevor leaned his head sideways, closed his eyes, and rested his hands against his cheek.

Sleepy?

He shook his head, pointed at Nate, and pantomimed like he was sleeping again.

Yeah, I'm tired. But I don't want to leave you.

Trevor shook his head and gestured again for Nate to sleep. Then he mouthed something that Nate didn't catch. Trevor pointed up at the light, and Nate understood.

I'll leave the light on.

Trevor smiled.

Chasing a Ship



The cell phone did not ring until late Tuesday morning during class, beeping the melody of “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” Nate hastily pressed the green answer button. “Hi.”

“Can you talk?” asked Mr. Stott.

“I’m in class,” Nate said softly. “But my teacher is on the fudge.”

“Good. Still no definite leads on the Haags. At least twenty members of the family currently live in Colson. I’ve found names and addresses for most of them. Narrowing down the list of candidates might take some time. I do, however, have solid info on the ship.”

“Where is it?”

“Among his many hobbies, Hanaver liked to construct model vessels. His masterpiece was an elaborate clipper housed inside a bottle. Guess what the name was.”

“I don’t want to say it out loud,” Nate said.

“Right. The USS *Stargazer*. Not based on any actual ship I could find, although I came across a *Star Trek* vessel with that name. The model is currently owned by Victoria Colson, daughter of Ebner Mills, a grandson of Hanaver. Victoria is the wife of our current mayor, Todd Colson.”

“What do we do?”

“I’ll drive my route after school,” Mr. Stott said. “Meet me with Pigeon and Summer at the bottom of Monroe Circle at about three-thirty.”

“You got it.”

“See you then.” The line went dead.

Nate put away the phone. Both Pigeon and Summer were staring at him from across the room. He had called them on Saturday and explained what had happened to Trevor. Nate nodded to confirm that it was the call they had been expecting.

Nate had mostly laid low over the weekend, and had instructed Summer and Pigeon to do the same. If Mrs. White was watching, he did not want to be out in the open unnecessarily. His one exception had been the visit to Trevor’s house on Sunday afternoon.

His stomach had been in knots when he knocked on the door, but he had known it was unfair to let Trevor’s parents think their son might be dead. He could barely look Trevor’s mom in the eye when she answered the door.

“Hi, Nate, are you here for Trevor?” To his astonishment, she had not sounded distressed.

“You could say that,” Nate had replied.

She had placed her hands on her hips and sighed. “You know, I’m having the hardest time keeping track of that boy! He’s always off on one errand or another. Seems like he’s hardly ever home lately!”

Feeling a new level of respect for the white fudge, Nate had decided not to meddle any further, hoping that somehow they would rescue Trevor before his parents ever knew he had been in danger. Part of him doubted whether it would have been possible to convince them their son was missing, no matter how much evidence he presented.

Other than visiting Trevor’s parents, updating Summer and Pigeon, and

waiting in vain for Mr. Stott to call, Nate had spent the weekend attending to Trevor. He wrote him notes, showed him the Sunday funnies, and even put on a slapstick puppet show.

Trevor had pantomimed that he could not sleep inside the mirror realm. He spent many of the daylight hours exploring the void where he was trapped. Using Nate's bathroom mirror as his home base, he had visited his own house, Pigeon's, and had even gone across the creek to Summer's. He had vowed not to spy on Cheryl when she used the bathroom.

Nate had written to Trevor about how his parents seemed oblivious to his disappearance, and had detailed the clues the teleidoscope had revealed, along with the plans he and Mr. Stott were hatching. Trevor often seemed bored, but his spirits remained fairly buoyant, considering the circumstances. Nate made sure the bathroom light stayed on all night.

Snapping the cell phone closed, Nate pocketed it. The lunch bell was about to ring. Miss Doulin sat at her desk, watching the clock as eagerly as her students, the thin red second hand ticking up toward twelve. Nate wondered how many pieces of fudge she would be eating. If she was anything like his parents and sister, it would be a lot.

The second hand went vertical and the bell rang.

Summer sat down across from Pigeon and opened her lunch sack. She glanced at Nate, sitting alone at the far side of the lunch area, pulling a pear from his lunch bag. He still wanted to sit apart, in hopes that Mrs. White would hold him and Trevor solely responsible for stealing the teleidoscope. It was a nice thought, but Summer doubted whether they were fooling anyone.

She was still struggling to absorb what had happened to Trevor. It was nightmarish to think of him roaming from mirror to mirror, unable to sleep, no heartbeat, surrounded by darkness and silent windows to the world he had left behind. Summer had worried that Mrs. White might be dangerous, but Trevor's fate surpassed her worst expectations. What if they never got him out?

Summer unwrapped her turkey sandwich and took a bite. It tasted dry. Not

enough meat, not enough mayo, the bread getting stale. Her dad used to make such good sandwiches! The white fudge was even ruining her lunchtime!

On her second bite, she paused mid-chew, watching Denny, Kyle, and Eric saunter over to stand behind Pigeon. Denny slapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, Pigeon, what’s for lunch?”

Pigeon looked at Summer, eyes wide. These were the first words Denny had spoken to him since the incident with the trick candy.

“You better take off,” Summer said.

“You’ve got us all wrong,” Denny said, acting wounded. “We’re here to give Pigeon a treat. Sort of a payback for everything he’s done for us.”

Kyle set a waxy pink cube in front of Pigeon. “Yeah, Pigeon, this one is on us.”

“Eat up,” Eric said.

Summer slid a hand into her pocket.

“What is it?” Pigeon asked. “Laxatives?”

“Pigeon!” Denny said. “We’re not going to poison you. We got this at the best candy store in town, the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. You really should have a taste.”

“Why don’t you guys take a hike?” Nate said, stalking toward them, hands clenched into fists.

“Dirt Face!” Denny said, spreading his arms. “I was wondering when you’d turn up. We have a present for you as well.”

“Leave my friend alone,” Nate said.

“We brought treats for all you guys,” Denny said, grinning like a shark. “Where’s Trevor?”

Nate lowered his shoulder and charged Denny. Eric reached out a hand, grazing Nate's shoulder, and a flash of electricity sent Nate twirling through the air. He landed on top of a lunch table a few yards away, his foot thumping the head of a Latino girl. Eric looked surprised at how effective the jolt had been.

"Whoa, Dirt Face!" Denny laughed. "Those were some smooth moves!"

Summer slapped her hand to her mouth, jumped over the lunch table, and swatted Denny on the back of his neck as he was still laughing. A sizzling flash sent him soaring forward in a flying somersault. He landed on his back on the concrete.

Pigeon also had Shock Bits in his hand now, Summer was reaching for another handful, and Kyle was digging in his pocket as well. Eric rushed over and crouched beside Denny. A short, pudgy yard duty, Ms. Figgoria, hustled over to them.

"Absolutely no fireworks at school!" the furious woman huffed. "Who set those off! I want names!"

Nate rolled off the table. He had warm lasagna mashed against his shirt and jeans from the pair of trays he had landed on. The girl he had accidentally kicked glared at him. Eric helped Denny to his feet.

"We don't have fireworks," Kyle said. "Ask my mom!"

"I saw a bright flash," Ms. Figgoria said. "Empty your pockets!"

Kyle, Summer, and Pigeon showed the yard duty their candy. She checked Eric and Denny as well. Apparently she had missed Nate's flight, because she paid him no heed. She studied the ground, hunting for remnants of fireworks. Ms. Figgoria got huffier as it became clear that there was no evidence of wrongdoing.

"You haven't tried the white fudge from Sweet Tooth, have you?" Kyle asked.

"I don't eat sugar," Ms. Figgoria replied. "And I don't tolerate nonsense. You kids better get your acts together."

“Later,” Denny promised, patting Pigeon on the shoulder before strolling off with Eric and Kyle to eat lunch.

“Are you okay?” Summer asked Nate.

“I’ve been zapped by those Shock Bits more times than I’d like,” Nate grumbled. “It’s like getting kicked from every direction all at once.”

“Summer shocked Denny back,” Pigeon said.

“I sort of saw,” Nate said. “What are they doing with Shock Bits?”

“Looks like they picked up our old after-school job,” Summer said.

“As if things weren’t bad enough,” Nate moaned. “You guys have many Shock Bits left?”

“A decent amount,” Pigeon said.

“I need to go to the rest room and wash up,” Nate said. “Can I borrow a dose for safety?”

“Of course,” Pigeon said. “How about two mouthfuls?”

“While you’re handing out candy, do you have an extra Sweet Tooth I could borrow?” Summer asked.

“Sure,” Pigeon said. “I’ve only used one so far.”

“Let’s hope they don’t know about these yet,” Summer said, placing the candy on her tongue.

She walked over to the table where Denny, Eric, and Kyle were sitting. Eric nudged Denny, who turned to confront Summer. “Touch me again and you’ll regret it,” he threatened.

“Don’t mess with my friends. I just came over to warn you guys about Mrs. White. She’s dangerous. Did you hear what she did to Trevor?”

“She told us how you guys betrayed her,” Eric said. “Man, you morons

spoiled a good thing.”

“Our gain,” Kyle said.

“She trapped Trevor as a reflection in a mirror,” Summer said. “Maybe forever. Worse will happen to you guys. Count on it. You should quit taking candy from her.”

They were all listening attentively. Eric even nodded. Denny suddenly shook his head. “She warned us about the Sweet Tooth junk, if that’s what you’re trying.” The other two boys snapped out of the trance. “You almost had me going for a second.”

“I’m just giving you fair warning,” Summer said. “You’re walking into a very messy situation.”

“Only because you losers made the mess,” Denny said. “Stop trying to warn us. Stop trying to talk to us. I understand you’re jealous that we’re getting all your candy. Tough luck. Stay out of our way, or you really will get hurt.”

“I can’t believe how much Mandy Meyers keeps staring at you,” Summer said, changing the subject abruptly and making her tone much more conversational.

“Yeah?” Denny said, checking over his shoulder. Mandy Meyers was the sixth-grade girl who enjoyed the celebrity status of most desirable female at Mt. Diablo Elementary. Mandy was seated one table over. Summer had noticed that she was sort of facing Denny.

“That kind of window of opportunity closes fast,” Summer said. “If you like Mandy, you should make a move.” Summer deliberately said Mandy’s name loudly, earning a glance from her, which Denny noticed.

“You think?” he asked, sitting up a little straighter.

“Girls like Mandy want a guy who knows how to take control of a situation. She doesn’t want to play games. She wants a guy bold enough to fearlessly share his feelings.”

“Lame as you are, you may be right,” Denny said.

“Go for it,” Kyle encouraged.

“You’re the man,” Eric said.

Denny got up and started walking around the lunch table. Summer could not believe he was falling for it. What a difference between proposing something he wanted to hear versus suggesting an idea he didn’t want to believe! She would have to keep that in mind. She moved close enough to eavesdrop.

“I noticed you looking at me,” Denny said to Mandy.

She stared up at him uncertainly. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t be shy. I think you’re a hottie too. Want to go out with me?”

Mandy looked befuddled. “No, I don’t even know you.”

“That’s the idea, we’ll get to know each other,” Denny said, throwing in a wink.

“I think you need mental help,” Mandy said, turning her back on him. Her friends snickered.

Denny retreated, face reddening. He glared at Summer, awareness registering in his eyes.

“You don’t believe me when I tell the truth,” Summer said. “But you totally gobble up the lie!”

“Don’t worry,” Denny replied. “You’ll get yours.”

The faded blue ice cream truck rolled forward, leaving behind a pair of young teenagers holding chocolate-dipped ice cream bars. Electronic music chimed, sounding like an amplified demo song from a cheap keyboard. Nate, Summer, and Pigeon did their best to look casual as the truck squeaked to a stop in front

of them.

“Here are some familiar faces,” Mr. Stott blustered. “How about some candy on the house?”

“Sure,” Nate said.

“All of this candy is extremely difficult to make. Feel free to use it, but please do not waste it. Pigeon, this sack is full of Brain Feed. You will not eat this yourself. Brain Feed grants animals temporary human intelligence and communication skills. Most birds, mammals, and reptiles find it delicious. The effect should last about ten minutes. Brain Feed does not guarantee friendship, but you’ll find that many animals will be cooperative. A big helping lasts no longer than a small one, so portion it sparingly. Pretend to give me money for it.”

Pigeon acted like he was handing Mr. Stott money and accepted the bag.

“Summer, I call this gum Peak Performance. You get six sticks in a pack. While chewing it, you’ll find yourself performing at the absolute limits of your physical capacity for as long as the flavor lasts. Not only will you sprint faster than you ever have, you will be able to continue at top speed without tiring. You’ll find yourself almost perfect at dodging, aiming, balancing, and a wide array of acrobatic feats. A serious athlete would trade anything for a substance like this.”

Summer pretended to pay and accepted the package of gum.

“Nate, these jawbreakers are Ironhides. Four in a bag. While they last, your body will have a durability that surpasses tempered steel. You’ll be no heavier or faster or stronger, but you’ll be very difficult to hurt. As with all enchanted consumables, don’t mix any of these treats with other magical edibles. Use one type at a time.”

“What are we supposed to do?” Nate asked, pretending to pay and accepting the four jawbreakers bundled in yellow plastic netting.

“Ever since William P. Colson founded this town, the Colson family has maintained a weighty presence here. They have amassed a fortune through mining and real estate. Their donations keep the town museum afloat and

account for our fine public library. The Colson clan has provided the town with five mayors, including Todd Colson, who currently holds the office. His wife, Victoria, inherited a model clipper ship in a bottle called the *USS Stargazer*. We need that ship. Hanaver Mills hid the map to the treasure inside.”

“Where do they keep the boat?” Summer asked.

“I don’t know,” Mr. Stott said. “Two of Hanaver’s model ships are on display in the town museum, but neither one is the *Stargazer*. Todd and Victoria Colson live in the North Ridge area on 14 Sunset Lane. Handsome house, big gate out front. Their two children are grown, so they live alone, along with whatever staff they retain. Victoria holds no day job; you should be able to find her at home.”

“Do you think it’s in their house?” Pigeon asked.

Mr. Stott’s eyebrows jumped. “Very likely. Of all his models, Hanaver was fondest of the *Stargazer*. The ship probably resides in a place of honor.”

“Should we break in?” Nate asked.

“You should perform reconnaissance first,” Mr. Stott said. “But be quick about it.”

“North Ridge is far,” Pigeon said.

“You’ll figure something out,” Mr. Stott said. “Did Belinda give you a Sweet Tooth or two? Might be an opportune time to use one. We’ve already been talking too long. Bring the ship to me once you have it. I’ll keep investigating the Haags. Call if you need me.”

The Candy Wagon pulled away, music bleeping.

Nate looked at Pigeon. “This sounds like a job for Sweet Teeth and Brain Feed.”

Pigeon folded his arms and shuffled his feet. “Both of my candies are good for reconnaissance.”

“Think you could pose as an overeager student?” Nate asked. “Go bug the mayor?”

“Nobody would buy Pigeon as an eager student!” Summer joked.

“I don’t know,” Pigeon said. “Sounds risky.”

“Or you can give me some of your candy and I’ll do it,” Nate said. “I think I could act studious in an emergency.”

Pigeon pressed his lips together. “No, it’s my candy, I should do it. If I act like it’s for a school report, nobody can get angry. I can call my cousin. He’ll give me a ride on his motorcycle.”

“You sure?” Summer said.

Pigeon nodded. “I can’t let Trevor down. If things go well, maybe I’ll come back with the *Stargazer*. Worst case, I’ll at least learn where it is.”

“Okay,” Nate said. “Call when you know something, or when you need us. You can do this, Pidge. It’s right up your alley.”

“Hey, if you’re going to be on a motorcycle, you can finally get some use out of that jacket,” Summer said.

“No way,” Pigeon said. “Today, I need to look as nerdy as possible. I know just the sweater.”

Nate leaned against his bathroom counter, scrawling in a notebook. He held up the page to show Trevor.

The Stargazer is a ship in a bottle owned by the mayor of Colson. Pigeon is going to try to find out where he keeps it.

Trevor pointed at himself and shaped his hands into binoculars.

The mayor lives in North Ridge. Pigeon acted like it was far.

Trevor frowned and nodded.

Guess what? Denny, Eric, and Kyle are now working for Mrs. White. Might not hurt to spy on them if you get the chance.

Trevor looked astounded by the news, then connected his thumb and forefinger to make an okay sign.

They used Shock Bits on me today at school. Summer shocked Denny, and used a Sweet Tooth to get him to ask out Mandy Meyers. Mandy totally denied him!

Nate could not hear the sound, but Trevor laughed hard.

“Somewhere over the Rainbow” started playing. Nate answered the cell phone. “Hello?”

“Glad I reached you, Nate,” Mr. Stott said. “I need you to come to my house right away. There is someone I want you to meet, and something I want to give you.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“See you soon.”

“ ’Bye.”

Trevor stared at Nate curiously.

I have to visit Mr. Stott. I guess he forgot to give me something. I’ll be back in a while.

Trevor pointed at himself, made a walking motion with two fingers, and raised his hands to his eyes like binoculars.

Yes, go and spy. Later.

Trevor saluted and jogged out of view.

Pigeon held onto Nile, trying not to cling like he was scared as they leaned around a corner onto Sunset Place. Pigeon loved the exhilaration of riding a motorcycle, but cornering made him feel off-balance. Nile accelerated down the road, the sudden increase in speed making Pigeon's insides lurch.

All of the houses in the North Ridge community were remarkable structures with professionally landscaped yards, but number 14 at the end of the cul-de-sac was the most impressive of them all. A brick driveway flanked by white planters led from the black iron gates to a wide mansion made splendid by numerous turrets, chimneys, and balconies.

Nile came to a stop at the gate, dropping his feet to steady the motorcycle. "You want me to go up with you?" he asked.

"For this to work, I need to seem nerdy and pathetic," Pigeon explained. "You're too cool."

"All right," Nile said. "I'll keep an eye out until you get inside, then I'll check back every ten minutes or so. If I loiter too long in a neighborhood like this, somebody might call the cops."

Pigeon hopped down off the bike and removed his helmet. He wore a sky-blue button-down sweater and khakis. "Do I look pathetic?" he asked.

"No comment," Nile said.

Pigeon had told Nile that he was working on a report for school, and that he hoped the mayor might let him take some old Colson artifacts into his class. When Nile had come to pick him up, he had spotted a box of white fudge on the table and snuck a piece, confiding that he had become mildly addicted.

Running to the gate, Pigeon put a Sweet Tooth into his mouth and pressed the button on the intercom. He glanced up and noticed a security camera aimed at him.

"Colson residence," said a male voice. "May I ask your name?"

"I'm Paul Bowen. I'm hoping to talk to Mrs. Colson. I go to Mt. Diablo, and

I'm working on a report about Hanaver Mills."

"Do you have an appointment?" the voice asked.

Pigeon hoped the Sweet Tooth would work through an intercom. "I'm only ten. I wasn't sure how I would make an appointment. I thought maybe I'd just drop by. Can't you let me see her? It will only take a couple of minutes."

"One moment."

Pigeon waited. He slid the Sweet Tooth around his mouth with his tongue.

The gates started opening on their own. Pigeon heard Nile riding away. "Come on in," the voice invited.

Pigeon followed the driveway to the elegant front door. A middle-aged man in a shirt and tie opened the door and admitted him. Pigeon stared up at a magnificent chandelier suspended above a grand staircase. A fat Persian cat, its long hair a tawny brown, relaxed on the stairs, licking a black paw. The man escorted Pigeon across the marble entryway and indicated a room off to one side. "You're welcome to wait in the parlor," the man said in a friendly, unpretentious manner. "Mrs. Colson is on a call, and may be a few minutes."

"Okay, thanks," Pigeon said, looking around the well-appointed sitting room.

"Be brief and polite," the man added in a confidential tone. He winked and exited, closing the door.

Pigeon hesitantly sat down on an ornate pink and black chair. The furniture looked almost too nice to touch. There were several paintings on the walls, mostly pastoral scenes.

After waiting for a minute or so, Pigeon rose and leaned an ear against the door. From his pocket he removed a plastic sandwich bag full of reddish-brown kibbles. The sack the Brain Feed had come in was too large for pockets, so Pigeon had downsized the bag.

Pigeon inched the door open and peeked out. The Persian cat was walking away down a hall, but paused when Pigeon hissed at it softly and shook some

Brain Feed into his palm. Pigeon set a few bits of food on the floor near the door and backed away. The cat came forward, sniffed the food, ate it, then entered the room.

“That was quite good, have you any more?” the cat asked in an articulate female voice.

He did not know what he had expected, but hearing the cat suddenly speaking in perfect English left Pigeon momentarily speechless. “Sure, if you help me out,” he finally managed.

“Do I strike you as an errand girl?” the cat sniffed, raising her head imperiously.

“I meant a favor,” Pigeon said.

“I seldom grant favors, and certainly not in exchange for bribes.” The cat slunk to the center of the room, furry tail swishing lazily behind her.

Pigeon remembered that he still had the Sweet Tooth in his mouth, and resolved to be more direct. “You must know this house very well,” he said.

“None know it better,” the cat declared.

“Have you seen a model ship inside a bottle?”

“Here in the house? Certainly not.” The cat stretched.

“A really nice model, built by Hanaver Mills,” he specified.

“By Hanaver? You might try the Colson Museum.”

“This model isn’t in the museum,” Pigeon said, realizing that this line of questioning was getting him nowhere. “Is Mrs. Colson nice?”

“Nice? That depends. She can be affectionate and generous. She can be cold and ruthless. I quite like her.”

“How about I give you some more of this food just to be kind,” Pigeon said.

“How magnanimous of you,” the cat said sarcastically.

Pigeon set a few more kibbles on the floor, and the cat ate them. “I must say, as sorry as it looks, this stuff has a most agreeable aftertaste. Where did you get it?”

“Hard to explain,” Pigeon said. “Look, I—”

At that moment Mrs. Colson came through the door, a slender woman in a smart gray suit, her hair short and stylish. Pigeon jumped up and tried not to look like he had been having a conversation with a cat. Mrs. Colson strode forward, extending a hand toward Pigeon with the breezy camaraderie of a practiced politician. “Victoria Colson, so nice to meet you, Paul.”

“Thank you for letting me visit,” Pigeon said, meeting her assertive grip limply.

Mrs. Colson bent down and picked up the cat. “How did you get in here, Jasmine?”

“My fault,” Pigeon apologized. “I noticed her in the hall and opened the door. I like cats.”

“More like you lured me in here with salty snacks,” Jasmine purred.

“A fellow feline enthusiast,” Mrs. Colson said with an automatic smile. She did not appear to have heard the cat speak. “Please, Paul, have a seat.” He sat back down on the pink and black chair. Mrs. Colson alighted on the sofa, stroking Jasmine. “How may I help you?”

“I’m working on a project for school about the models Hanaver Mills built. He’s your ancestor, right?”

“My great-great-grandfather, yes.”

“I’ve seen the boats in the town museum, but I read that he had a favorite, a ship called the *Stargazer* housed inside a bottle. I’d love to have a look and maybe take a picture if you know where I can find it.”

Mrs. Colson placed a manicured finger beside her lips. “I donated the

Stargazer to the library as a display piece several years ago,” she said thoughtfully. “I’m in there almost every week, but I can’t say I’ve seen it. The model must have ended up in storage. You know who could help you is Leslie Wagner, the head librarian. I’ll give you a note. Bravo for going the extra mile on your research! Wait here one moment.”

“You got on her good side,” Jasmine remarked as Mrs. Colson exited the room. “Victoria has always been a pushover for kids and animals. Funny all the interest in Hanaver lately.”

“All the interest?” Pigeon asked.

“Some of his belongings were recently stolen from the Colson Museum,” Jasmine said. “And of course Belinda White keeps asking Victoria about Hanaver Mills memorabilia.”

“Belinda White?”

“She telephones on occasion,” Jasmine said. “Belinda runs the new candy shop on Main. She sends us the most delicious complimentary treats: peanut brittle, chocolate macadamias, truffles, fudge . . . I would love to meet her face-to-face.”

Mrs. Colson returned, heels clicking across the marble entryway. She stopped in the doorway, a piece of stationery in hand, and glanced at her delicate wristwatch. “If you get down to the library before six, you might catch Mrs. Wagner before she heads home.”

Pigeon crossed to the doorway and accepted the pink slip of paper. “Thanks a lot, Mrs. Colson,” he said.

“My pleasure,” she replied, guiding him to the door.

“Come again, Paul,” Jasmine called.

Pigeon turned and waved. Mrs. Colson closed the door. That had gone smoothly! He wondered if the Sweet Tooth had made Mrs. Colson so obliging, or if perhaps he would not have needed the candy in the first place. He hurried down the driveway as the gates swung open. With Nile nowhere in sight, he set

off along Sunset Place.

Sliding a hand into his pocket, Pigeon fingered the Brain Feed. What a remarkable creation! Without the kibble, Jasmine could not possibly comprehend English, which meant that the Brain Feed not only granted her the ability of speech, it also allowed her to instantly and effortlessly make sense of previous human interactions she had witnessed. Plus, the magical kibble functioned so naturally that the cat had not seemed a bit amazed to be conversing with a person. Pigeon determined that after visiting the library he would have to spend some time getting to know his dog.

The Library



Nate rapped on the door and Mr. Stott answered. “Come in, my boy,” he said.

“What’s going on?” Nate asked, stepping inside.

“I want to introduce you to a colleague of mine.” Mr. Stott closed the door. He led Nate down the hall and paused outside a door across from his bedroom. “We magicians sometimes employ engineered apprentices. Assistants whom we imbue with power to make them more useful.”

“Like the fat guy full of orange goop who works for Mrs. White,” Nate said.

“Precisely. I don’t as a rule tamper with my assistants, but many years ago, a loyal man who served me contracted a terminal illness. As the end neared, he urged me to preserve his life. The only hope within the parameters of my abilities was to drastically alter his physiology. I explained the hazards, and still he beseeched me to make an attempt.

“In many respects, the procedure went wrong. Although I succeeded in sparing his life, it came at the price of his humanity. Physically he was ruined, and mentally he had changed as well, grown simpler. I can still communicate with him, which is why you are here. He renamed himself the Flatman. I tell you about him in advance because his appearance is unsettling. Upon seeing him for the first time, two people, to my recollection, have passed out, and others have become nauseated.”

Mr. Stott opened the door. Nate walked into a dim room. Heavy drapes

obscured the windows. A solid table stood in the middle of the room beside a wicker rocking chair. On the table sat a shallow aquarium filled halfway with fluid that reeked of formaldehyde. The Flatman floated on the surface of the fluid.

Half curious, half disgusted, Nate drew closer. The creature looked like a cross between a human being and a fried egg. About the size of a Frisbee, the Flatman was sheathed in pale human skin, complete with pores and faint wrinkles. He had one large eye, one small eye, and three misshapen slits—presumably two nostrils and a mouth. Four translucent fins flapped languidly, their form eerily reminiscent of hands and feet. The larger eye had a fleshy lid that opened and closed, while the smaller one perpetually stared. Nate could appreciate why people might pass out upon meeting the Flatman.

“Can he hear me?” Nate asked.

“Most assuredly,” Mr. Stott said.

“Can he talk?”

“Not as you or I speak. After completing the botched transformation, I assumed my assistant would not want to continue in this state. But his will to live was extraordinary—to this day he claims he is glad to be alive. Along with all he lost, he did acquire some new abilities. One side effect of the changes I wrought is that his consciousness drifts across time, allowing him to glimpse the past and the future.”

“Can he see outside this room?”

“He can see only places where he was or will be, and he has no conscious control over the ability. At times he becomes confused. The past is constant, but the future is always in motion. Some of the futures he glimpses never come to pass. Lately he has been observing a future without me in it to feed and take care of him. He has seen himself anonymously starving, unable to seek help. And then this afternoon he adamantly insisted I needed to give you the most powerful confection in my possession.”

“Give it to me?” Nate asked. “Does he know me?”

“Perhaps he overheard your name during a prior visit. More likely, he has observed you in the future. He stubbornly maintains that giving you the Grains of Time will be my only hope for surviving the looming hostilities. When he acts this resolute, I have come to rely on his predictions.” Mr. Stott held up a small hourglass on a silver chain. Ornately decorated, the hourglass contained blue sand in one chamber, red sand in the other, with a tiny yellow pellet plugging the gap between the two.

“What does it do?”

“I created the Grains of Time with the help of my master, who has since passed away. I do not believe I could devise another like it. Back then we took more pride in packaging our formulations, before the world fell in love with all things plastic and disposable. To function correctly, the grains must be consumed in the proper order—first blue, then red, then yellow. The blue will take you into the past, the red into the future, and the yellow will give you temporary dominion over the present. The three types of sand must be consumed in rapid succession or the spell will fail. Use the contents of this hourglass only in the moment of your most dire need. You will get only one chance.”

Mr. Stott handed Nate the hourglass.

“Do I wear it around my neck?”

“That would seem sensible,” Mr. Stott said.

“Are you sure you want to give this to me?”

“Sure enough. Tell me, has Pigeon had any luck locating the *Stargazer*?”

“I haven’t heard back yet,” Nate said. “Don’t worry, we’ll find it.”

Mr. Stott scratched his beard and shifted his feet awkwardly. He cleared his throat, coughing lightly into his fist. “Nate, if something should happen to me in the coming days, I’m wondering if you might keep an eye on the Flatman for me. He eats fish flakes and canned cat food. The mixture he floats in is three parts water, one part formaldehyde. He can help you learn the details. If other forms of communication fail, one blink means yes, two means no. Could you do that for me?”

Nate looked over at the Flatman. A fleshy pancake with a disfigured face was about the last pet he would ever choose, but he supposed he could get used to it. “Okay. But let’s try to avoid the need. You take care.”

“Count on it,” Mr. Stott said. “I simply prefer to cover my bases. If ever you require access to the house when I am not around, there is a way to bypass the defensive spells. Swear to me you will keep it private.”

“I promise,” Nate said.

“Ring the doorbell twice. Say, ‘Archmus, I am a friend indeed.’ Then ring the doorbell again. You should hear the locks in the door unfasten themselves. At that point, the house is yours. Got it?”

“Yes.”

“Do it only if your need is dire and I am not answering the door.”

“Okay,” Nate said.

“You had better run along. If you can get the ship tonight, do it. The sooner we find the map, the sooner we can free Trevor. I’ll continue narrowing down Haag family candidates.”

“All right. See you later, Mr. Stott. See you, Flatman.”

One of the fragile fins seemed to wave good-bye.

Summer counted her Flame Outs, ending up with a pile of fourteen. She knew how many she had, but wanted to conduct a careful inventory in preparation for breaking into the mayor’s house. Summer, Pigeon, Nate, and Trevor each maintained a personal stash of candy. In addition to her Flame Outs, Summer had three doses of Shock Bits, eight Moon Rocks, six sticks of Peak Performance gum, and the extra Sun Stone.

Since she had so many, she frequently considered sharing her Flame Outs with

the others, but worried that Mrs. White may have been right not to trust the boys with such potentially destructive candy. She could envision Nate and Pigeon burning down the entire town.

The telephone rang, and Summer picked it up. Her dad was not home yet, so she reached for a pen to take a message. "Atler residence."

"Summer, it's Pigeon."

"Wow, you're already done! Any luck?"

"I just got back from the town library."

"The library?" She started doodling a sailboat on the notepad by the phone.

"Mrs. Colson donated the ship to the library. And she wrote me a recommendation asking the head librarian to help me find it. I caught the librarian as she was leaving. She was really nice, maybe because the Sweet Tooth was helping, and we spent almost half an hour searching through three storage rooms. In the end, we found the *Stargazer*."

"Yes! Great job. Do you have it?"

"I tried to talk her into letting me take it home for the night, but she resisted the idea. I used a few different approaches, but quit when she started getting angry. In the end, she said I could come take videos or pictures of it whenever I want. It's pretty big, more like a ship in a jug than in a bottle. But I know right where it is. The only problem is, I'm going to look pretty guilty after we steal it tonight."

"Have you talked to Nate?" Summer asked.

"Not yet. I just got home. I'll call him. Let's meet on the path at one. Bring your bike."

"Okay. If I don't hear back, I'll assume that's the plan."

"Right. Oh, and Summer, the Brain Feed is amazing. I had this really coherent conversation with a cat. You won't believe it."

“That’s cool.”

“See you tonight.”

“ ’Bye.”

Nate sat on the edge of his bed winding a yo-yo. He was trying to get the yo-yo to sleep, but it refused to hang and spin at the bottom of the string, and kept getting tangled instead. He tried again, throwing the yo-yo down, popping his wrist just before it finished unwinding. He timed it wrong. Not only did the yo-yo fail to sleep, it wound back up only halfway.

The failure was not too upsetting. Larger issues loomed in his mind. He and his friends were about to undertake another mission. This time they were invading a library. Each new mission felt more dangerous. Once Trevor had gotten trapped in the mirror, any semblance of fun had vanished. Magic candy was now only a tool to hopefully help undo the trouble they were in.

On prior occasions when Nate had felt overwhelmed by anxiety, he had always eventually ended up talking it over with his parents. They tended to be understanding and helpful. Sometimes they could make major worries fade away with simple reassurances or advice.

But he couldn’t get help from his parents on this one. He had tried to broach the subject of Trevor in the mirror with his mom twice already, but she became instantly distracted. The white fudge created a daunting communication barrier.

Nate wondered what would happen if he pressed as hard as he could, doggedly compelling his parents to recognize what was happening. In a way, he was afraid to try. He did not want to learn that no matter how blunt he was or how hard he pushed, he was cut off from parental support when he needed it most. At the same time, if there was a chance of getting any help from them, the hour had arrived. He had never yearned more for his parents to intervene and bail him out of a predicament.

Setting the yo-yo down, Nate walked resolutely out of his room and down the stairs. He entered the family room, where his dad sat watching sports news.

“Dad, can we talk?”

Nate’s dad snapped out of his television trance. “Sure, son, what’s on your mind?”

“I’ve gotten involved in something really dangerous,” Nate said. “I’m in way over my head. I need your help.”

“Tell me about it,” his dad said, eyes wandering toward the television screen.

“It has to do with the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe,” Nate said.

“Love that fudge.”

“Dad, the white fudge is addictive. Not just because it tastes good. The fudge makes the people who eat it lose their focus and blinds them to what is going on around them.”

“I gave some to my boss,” his dad said. “He wants me to pick him up ten boxes of the stuff.”

“Which you shouldn’t do,” Nate urged. “The lady who runs the candy shop, Mrs. White, is some kind of magician. The white fudge is unsafe. Dad, I think she might try to hurt me.”

“Nothing wrong with eating fudge,” his dad said. “Just don’t go overboard. A little goes a long way.”

Nate frowned. His dad had switched his attention to the baseball scores flickering across the screen. “Dad, Mrs. White is trying to kill me. I’m not talking about eating too many sweets and having a heart attack. I’m talking about murder.”

His dad shifted in his seat and rubbed the side of his face. “Nate, I’ve had a long day, I don’t have time for your stories.”

“It isn’t a story,” Nate said, putting a Moon Rock in his mouth. He hopped into the air, twisting so that his body pressed flat against the ceiling before drifting down to the carpet. “Did you see that?”

“I told you, Nate,” his dad huffed, “I’ve had a long day.”

Nate leaped toward a wall, kicked off, and glided across the room. “Can you explain how I’m doing this?” Nate asked.

“Is there a show on you want to watch?” his dad asked impatiently. “Am I in your way? If you want the TV, you can ask me directly. I’m not a tyrant.”

Nate spit out the Moon Rock. He stood watching his dad. Through word or action, there appeared to be no way to pierce the fudge-induced fog. “Never mind, it’s no big deal.”

“Okay, don’t forget your homework,” his dad advised.

“My teacher forgot to give us homework,” Nate mumbled, walking from the room.

It was official. He was on his own.

The cool night air ruffled Nate’s hair as he coasted down Monroe Circle. He saw Pigeon waiting on the path astride his bike. As Nate hopped the curb and skidded to a stop, he saw Summer peddling down the path.

“Nice work finding the ship,” Nate said to Pigeon.

“Thanks,” Pigeon said. “The only hard part is, the library has an alarm system. But I can guide us straight to the *Stargazer*. I saw the key Mrs. Wagner used to open the supply room, and I saw the drawer in her desk where she keeps her key ring. Her office has a window on the ground floor, so if we break in through the window and snag her keys, we can be in and out in a couple of minutes.”

Summer pulled up beside them. “You guys ready?”

“The library has an alarm,” Nate told her. “Did you try to get the alarm code?” he asked Pigeon.

“When I tried to get Mrs. Wagner to let me take the boat home, she started acting suspicious of me,” Pigeon said. “After she had started resisting the Sweet Tooth, I got nervous and couldn’t think of even a vaguely plausible explanation for why she should give me the alarm code.”

“So what do we do?” Summer asked.

“We try to get out before anybody responds to the alarm,” Nate said. “Let’s go.”

They rode their bikes down the path and then turned onto Mayflower, which they followed until reaching a tree-lined street called Goodman Road. Not far down the road they came into view of the Nelson J. Colson Memorial Library, a sprawling, modern structure with lots of huge windows. The unusual slopes and angles of the contemporary library contrasted sharply with the neighboring old barn and fenced pastures. The decrepit barn stood near a paved road that branched out from the library parking lot and passed beneath an arched sign for Goodman Farm.

“What’s with the farm?” Nate asked.

“It’s cool,” Summer said. “That’s the original barn. It’s mainly for show. The rest of the farm is more current. They have real animals, but they run it like a park so people can see how a farm works. You can milk cows, feed pigs, pet sheep, take a hayride, that sort of thing.”

“My family likes to go there,” Pigeon said.

“I’ve been there on field trips,” Summer said.

“Gotcha,” Nate said. “Where are we headed, Pigeon?”

“This way,” he said, riding his bike onto the lush lawn encompassing the library. The grass was thick and ready to be mowed, making peddling hard work. Pigeon gave up grinding forward and walked his bike over to the side of the library, leaning it against the wall behind a bush. Nate and Summer did likewise.

Pigeon led them along the side of the building, trudging through wood chips, weaving around shrubs and young trees. He peeked through a window.

“Anybody bring a flashlight?” he asked.

“I forgot,” Nate said.

“I have one,” Summer said, removing a small black flashlight from her pocket.

Pigeon pressed the flashlight to the glass and clicked it on. “Not this one,” he reported. “I pretended to be admiring Mrs. Wagner’s view and unlocked her window. If she didn’t notice, it’ll make life easier.”

After peering into the next window, Pigeon gave them a thumbs-up. Pressing his palms against the glass, he slid the window sideways. “Phew,” he said. “If we’d had to break the glass, I would have looked ten times more guilty. If we’re careful, they may not ever realize anything was taken, and I’ll be off the hook.”

The windowsill was about the height of their necks. Nate boosted Pigeon and Summer through, then grasped the windowsill, kicked off the wall, and pulled himself up. By the time he was standing in the office, Pigeon had the keys in hand. A steady beep filled the air.

Clutching the flashlight, Pigeon led them out of the office and down a hall. The beeping continued, warning them to punch in the code to disarm the alarm. They reached a staircase that went down to a basement and curved up to a second story. Pigeon led them up. Near the top of the staircase, the beeping stopped and an obnoxious alarm started blaring. Emergency lights flashed.

They ran along a hall at the top of the stairs. One side of the hall had several doors and a couple of drinking fountains. The other side overlooked orderly ranks of bookshelves on the first floor. The hall let them out near a reference desk in an airy room divided by row after row of shelves.

Pigeon raced back into the book stacks, fumbling with the keys. At the end of the shelves they reached a wall with a gray door. Pigeon jabbed a key into the doorknob and opened it. The windowless room beyond was cluttered with books, cardboard boxes, stacked chairs and desks, framed pictures, wheeled carts, a pair of overhead projectors, a film projector, a phony-looking suit of armor, and metal shelves stocked with fake flowers and other diverse knickknacks.

The alarm blaring incessantly, Pigeon directed them to a shelf in an obscure corner of the room where the USS *Stargazer* sailed inside a clear bottle beside a marble bust of Mark Twain.

“It’s huge!” Nate shouted over the alarm. “That looks like a refill bottle for a water cooler!”

“I told you it was big,” Pigeon said.

The bottle rested on curved wooden mountings to prevent it from rolling. Nate scooped his arms under the bottle and lifted it off the shelf. It was almost too heavy for him to carry. Not only was the bottle big, but the glass seemed thick. “Lend me a hand, Pidge,” Nate grunted.

With Pigeon holding one end of the bottle, carrying the *Stargazer* was no problem. When they exited the storeroom, Pigeon kicked the door shut and made sure it was locked. They hurried between the bookshelves and hustled across an area full of tables and chairs near the resource desk.

Upon reaching the hall that led to the stairs, Nate and Pigeon stopped, the bottle cradled between them. Three figures waited in the hall, blocking their exit, lights pulsing around them. Denny, Eric, and Kyle.

“A boat, huh?” Denny called, striding forward. “Hand it over.”

“What are you guys doing here?” Nate asked.

Denny rolled his eyes. “What do you think, Dirt Face? We got a call from Mrs. White and followed you. Give me the boat.”

Summer took a baggie of Shock Bits out of her pocket and dumped some into her hand.

“Don’t make this hard!” Denny yelled, pointing at her. “Trust me, we have candy you guys haven’t seen.”

“Jump through a window,” Summer advised Nate, walking past him and putting the Shock Bits into her mouth.

Holding his end of the bottle with one hand, Nate snagged an Ironhide from his pocket. Like most jawbreakers, it felt smooth and hard against his tongue, and tasted sugary.

Denny shoved a small cookie past his lips. Eric and Kyle also each ate something. Kyle's fingers began sparking.

Denny began to swell. In seconds his oversized T-shirt looked small on him. His shoulders widened, his limbs grew longer and thicker, his belly expanded. Warts erupted on his face, and his nose plumped up like a potato. A sloping brow jutted over sunken eyes. He sprouted up to well over six feet tall, his frame filling out into the powerfully bloated physique of a professional lineman. Opening his inhumanly large mouth, he roared, drowning out the alarm and displaying dull yellow fangs.

“Run!” Summer shouted.

“Can you hold it?” Pigeon asked.

Nate hoisted the cumbersome bottle onto his shoulder and fled into the room with the bookshelves. Several large windows at the far side of the room offered a view of the old barn, dimly visible by the lights of the parking lot. As he studied the far wall, a particular window caught Nate's attention. It had a table beside it, which would provide the height he would need to leap through the glass.

As he ran, Nate questioned whether he really wanted to jump through a second-story window. He had the Ironhide in his mouth, but his skin did not feel any different. Then again, the bottle was heavy enough that it should be hurting his shoulder, but although he felt the pressure of the weight, there was no discomfort.

He heard another roar from Denny, alarmingly near. Even with his adrenalin pumping, the bottle was so heavy that he could barely manage, let alone run fast. Reaching the end of the room, Nate used a chair to step up onto the table near the tall window—a single pane of glass about four feet wide and eight feet tall. Trusting the jawbreaker, knowing that if it was a dud he was about to die, Nate charged across the table and lunged at the window with all his strength, aiming beyond the glass.

Head, arms, bottle, and torso punched through, and for a terrible moment, he lost momentum and hung draped over a jagged sheet of glass, feeling the pressure against his waist, but no pain. Then the glass buckled beneath him and he tipped forward, plunging headfirst toward the patio below along with a swarm of transparent knives. Disoriented as he was, Nate tried to twist his body to cushion the ship, but he felt the bottle rupture in his embrace as he struck the concrete.

Without the Ironhide he would have impaled himself and broken his neck. With the Ironhide, he experienced the wild rush of the fall, and a tactile sensation of striking the patio, but no pain. Glass had shredded his shirt, and shards glittered on the concrete all around him, but he did not have a scratch or a bruise on his body.

Two of the *Stargazer's* masts had snapped, and a long crack traversed the bow, but otherwise the ship seemed mostly intact. Nate got up and ran away from the library, uncertain of where to go. He saw headlights, and recognized a police car coming down Goodman Road toward the library parking lot.

The nearest cover was the barn, so Nate ran toward the dilapidated structure. Without the heavy bottle, carrying the ship was no problem. Coming around to the side of the rundown building, he found a modern door. It was locked, but had window panes. He searched around for something to smash the glass, finally remembering that his hand would do just fine. He bashed his fist through a pane, receiving no scratch and feeling no pain, reached down, and unlocked the door.

Pushing the door open, he hurried inside and shoved it closed. Enough light filtered in from the parking lot through several high windows that he could faintly distinguish the strange forms of antiquated farming equipment on display around the room. Seeking a hiding place, Nate wove between obsolete plows and combines until he reached a rickety ladder that led up to a high loft. The rotten rungs creaked in protest as he ascended, cradling the *Stargazer* in one arm while climbing with the other.

When he reached the loft, Nate did not like the warped contours of the floor or the way the wood groaned beneath his weight. He reminded himself that if he fell, he just had to protect the ship, because his body would not suffer any injury. Emboldened by the thought, he proceeded to a hatch in the roof and started stacking old crates in order to reach it.

Summer gaped at the monstrous new version of Denny, knowing that Nate would never escape with the ship if she failed to slow him. She held up her hands menacingly, hoping he might find the prospect of a shock discouraging. He leered and strode forward. Glancing back, Summer saw Nate dashing away with the *Stargazer* braced on his shoulder. Pigeon was swallowing some Shock Bits of his own.

Denny tried to brush Summer aside, but when his hand met hers, electricity sizzled. He lurched backwards several paces and dropped to one knee. Rising, he let out a barbaric cry of resentment.

Kyle and Eric rushed at Summer. Electricity crackled between Kyle's fingers, and Eric no longer looked like himself. Though he was still roughly the same size, his skin had coarsened into green scales, his eyes were yellow and reptilian, his nose and mouth had merged into a snout, and sharp claws tipped his fingers.

Summer started chewing her first stick of Peak Performance gum as she backed away from her attackers. Kyle lunged at her, but she spun nimbly away from his grasp. Eric sprang forward, swinging a clawed hand. Summer ducked the swipe and grabbed his scaly upper arm in one hand, his forearm in the other. Heaving and pivoting, she swung him into Kyle, releasing his arm just before a blaze of electricity launched Eric into a bookshelf.

While Summer was occupied with Kyle and Eric, Denny had raced around the altercation in pursuit of Nate. Pigeon charged forward, fingers sparking, and tried to touch Denny, but the overgrown bully dodged around him and continued after Nate, roaring savagely. Pigeon swapped targets, tagging Kyle on the elbow and sending him flying.

Summer saw Nate crash through the window, hang suspended for an instant, and then topple out of view. Denny froze, stunned by the sight, probably not understanding that Nate was uninjured. Without knowing about the Ironhide, anyone would have expected to find Nate bloodied and dying on the ground below.

Kyle, Eric, Summer, and Pigeon all watched Denny edge forward and

hesitantly peer through the empty window. “He’s fine!” Denny growled. “He’s up and running! Get the ship!”

Denny sprinted away from the window, back toward Summer and the others. Eric raced for the stairs, moving with remarkable speed. Pigeon ate another handful of Shock Bits and moved to block Denny. Kyle put his hand to his mouth and sprang at Pigeon. When they touched, lightning stabbed from the floor to the ceiling, blasting Pigeon and Kyle away from each other with much greater force than any Shock Bits jolt Summer had witnessed. With them having shocked each other, the effect had evidently been multiplied.

Without breaking stride, Denny picked up a table and hurled it at Summer. She rolled out of the way and ended up back on her feet, but Denny was already past her. Her reactions felt razor sharp. She had been diving out of the way before the table had left Denny’s hands.

Pigeon sat up shakily, looking shell-shocked. “I’m going to help Nate,” Summer yelled at him, already running after Denny. He was big, but swift. Even though she was running faster than she had ever sprinted, by the time she was in the hall, he was already down the stairs.

Summer noticed a bookshelf near the top of the stairs. Without pausing to worry, she vaulted over the railing, landed gracefully on top of the bookshelf, crouched, dangled from the edge, and dropped to the floor. The actions felt as simple as skipping down a sidewalk.

Dashing after Denny, not too far behind him, Summer heard glass shatter. Ahead of both of them, Eric had taken an emergency fire extinguisher from its case and hurled it through a sizable window. Eric sprang through the window, followed by Denny. Summer stopped to study the situation.

A police car idled in the parking lot. The officer was on the radio, but was ignoring the lizardlike boy and the hulking figure beside him. Denny gestured for Eric to check around the other side of the library and then ran toward the barn. Realizing that the officer was probably blinded by white fudge, Summer climbed through the window and chased after Denny.

“He’s in here!” Denny bellowed upon reaching the door with the broken pane. He threw the door open and stormed inside.

Summer followed Denny into the dim barn, hearing him noisily blunder into old-fashioned farm machinery. Denny roared, and she heard metal squealing. Rushing around the edge of the room, Summer found the ladder and suspected that Nate might have headed that way. As she rapidly climbed, she heard Denny start scaling the ladder behind her. She hoped the unstable ladder might collapse under his weight, and took a Moon Rock from her pocket just in case.

When she reached the loft, Summer saw a suspicious pile of crates below a hatch in the ceiling and knew Nate had gone that way. She raced over to the crates and clambered up through the hatch. Nate stood across the roof, near the brink. "Nate!" she called in an urgent whisper.

"Summer? Where are they?"

"Right behind me," she said, dashing over to him.

"If I spit out the Ironhide and jump with a Moon Rock, do you think the boat will drag me down too fast?"

"Don't chance it," she said.

"The ship is already in bad shape," Nate said. "I don't want to demolish it."

"Aha!" boomed Denny from the hatch, boosting his bulky body through. "This is what they call a dead end."

Summer pulled something from her pocket.

"No more tricks," Denny warned. "Give me the boat."

Summer charged him, shouting as loud as she could.

Denny smirked and let out a tremendous bellow, a mighty cry that mingled the roar of a lion with the shriek of an eagle. As Denny roared, Summer winged the Sun Stone at him sidarm, a perfect throw into the center of his gaping mouth.

The roar abruptly ceased. Denny's hands went to his throat, and his knees began to wobble beneath the increased pull of gravity. His body snapped forward, slamming through the roof of the barn and then through the loft below,

finally smashing the barn floor with a tremendous crunch.

“You threw a Sun Stone in his mouth?” Nate marveled.

“The gum really works,” Summer said. “It felt like I couldn’t miss. Let’s hope he broke some bones.”

“I hope you didn’t kill him,” Nate said.

The thought made Summer worried. That had not been her intent. Denny had seemed so big that nothing could hurt him, but she supposed a three-story fall propelled by increased gravity could potentially kill just about anything. “Mrs. White said the Sun Stones reinforce people so the extra gravity doesn’t harm them. I bet that will protect him.”

“Oh, no,” Nate said.

Scaly Eric scrambled through the hatch, along with a taller, thinner version of Kyle. The new Kyle had spindly arms and legs, a long, narrow nose, and bluish skin. He had to be almost seven feet tall. “Careful,” Eric hissed to Kyle. “The roof didn’t hold Denny.”

“What happened to you guys?” Nate asked.

“Creature Crackers,” Kyle bragged, his voice raspier. “You guys don’t stand a chance.”

Summer spit out her gum and stuck a Flame Out in her mouth, planning to intimidate them with a warning shot. Heat radiated through her mouth—not the spiciness of hot candy but real heat, as if her tongue were a fiery coal. The temperature rapidly increased until it felt like her mouth was about to combust.

Tilting her head back, Summer expelled the candy up into the air. It emerged as a raging ball of fire, illuminating the night, growing larger as it soared higher. “Back off!” Summer yelled, staring down Eric and Kyle while readying another Flame Out.

“Summer!” Nate cried.

A quick glance skyward revealed that the fireball was falling back toward the

roof of the barn. She had inadvertently shot it almost straight up. Eric and Kyle dove through the hatch. Summer raced toward the edge of the roof, a Moon Rock in her hand. She slapped the candy into her mouth as she jumped. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Nate fling himself off the roof and plummet to the ground below.

Behind her, the fireball landed, spreading across half the roof, the dry shingles welcoming the searing flames. A scorching wave of heat washed over Summer as she glided away from the burning barn. By the time she reached the parking lot, Summer landed hard enough that she dropped to her knees, banging them against the asphalt. Rising, she leapt over to where Nate stood holding the *Stargazer*, which now had deep splits running through the gashed hull.

“I landed on my back,” he said. “It still got smashed up.”

Summer could see an imprint in the ground where he had landed. “At least it’s basically in one piece. Take the gum.” She handed him a stick. “Run to Mr. Stott’s. I’ll find Pigeon.”

“You think Denny will be all right?” Nate asked.

Summer gazed up at the barn. “Only the roof is burning so far. Eric and Kyle aren’t chasing us yet. I’m sure they’re helping him.”

Nate spit out the jawbreaker and put the gum in his mouth. “Get away as fast as you can,” he warned. “This is out of control.”

Overhead, snapping and popping, the flames leapt higher, reflecting hellishly off the billowing smoke.

A Short-Lived Victory



Dizzy, dazed, ears ringing, Pigeon vaguely heard Summer shout something about Nate, and saw her running after Denny. Across the room, Kyle was sitting up, hands clamped to the sides of his face. The redhead tried to stand but sank back to his knees.

Pigeon knew exactly how he felt.

Closing his eyes, he seemed to feel the room slowly rotate. The blaring of the alarm competed with the internal ringing for the distinction of most annoying noise in the universe. As he bowed his head and focused on his breathing, the rotating slowed and the ringing diminished.

Pigeon opened his eyes in time to see Kyle leap from the window. By the drifting quality of the jump, he could tell Kyle must have eaten a Moon Rock. Pigeon took out a Moon Rock of his own and staggered to the window.

On the patio below, Kyle spit out the Moon Rock and stuck a small cookie in his mouth. He started shooting upward, growing taller and thinner, limbs stretching, nose elongating.

“He’s in here!” Denny cried from over beside the barn.

Pigeon saw Summer dashing into the barn after Denny. The new, taller, uglier Kyle ran over to the barn, where he was joined by the reptilian Eric.

Slipping his own Moon Rock into his mouth, Pigeon leapt from the window,

soaring out over the patio and landing on the grass near the parking lot. The night air helped clear his head. Some distance away, a pair of horses watched the commotion from the pasture adjoining the barn. Pigeon started jumping in their direction, gliding across the field in long, gentle parabolas. One of the horses shied away at his approach; the other tossed its head and stamped a hoof.

Pigeon spit out the Moon Rock and dug some Brain Feed out of his pocket. The dappled gray horse was much bigger than it had appeared from a distance—Pigeon was nowhere near as tall as its back. He eased nearer to the horse, hand held out flat. The horse stepped toward him, lowering its head. The wet mouth brushed his palm as the horse ate the fragrant kibbles.

“You really aren’t supposed to come into the pasture,” the horse said in a friendly, masculine voice.

“It’s an emergency,” Pigeon said. “I need your help.”

“With what?”

“I was wondering if I could ride you to go help my friends.”

The horse chuckled. “Right. I get it. I’m a Percheron. Sure, they say we were bred to carry knights into battle, the tourists eat that up, but in real life, I pull the hay wagon, I make nice with the kids, I . . . whoa, check that out.”

Pigeon turned around and saw a blazing ball of fire rising up from the top of the barn, expanding as it ascended. The ball slowed, hung in the air, and then fell, holding its shape until unfurling wildly across the roof, setting the shingles ablaze.

“What kind of trouble did you say?” the horse said soberly.

“We’re trying to save the town from bad guys,” Pigeon said.

“Hop on.”

Pigeon stuck a Moon Rock into his mouth and lightly jumped up onto the broad back of the horse.

“You’re light!” the horse exclaimed. “No wonder you can bounce around like

a grasshopper. You'll want to grip with your knees. Go ahead and hang on to my mane."

The horse started cantering across the pasture. "How do we get out?" Pigeon asked.

"I've noticed a flimsy spot over here," the horse said, loping toward the library, then slowing at the fence. "Never thought I'd take advantage of it." A front hoof lashed out, and Pigeon heard a fencepost splitting. The hoof shot out a few more times, and the fence clattered down. The horse walked over the fallen wood. "Where are we going?"

"To that girl," Pigeon said, pointing at Summer. She was running toward him along the edge of the library parking lot. The horse trotted toward her.

"Pigeon!" Summer cried. "You're okay!"

"I was coming to get you," he said. "Need a lift?" He patted the horse's neck. "Can you handle her?"

"Easy as pie," the horse said.

"Use a Moon Rock," Pigeon suggested.

Summer put the candy in her mouth and floated up to sit behind Pigeon. "Let's get out of here," she said.

"Where's Nate?"

"Running the ship to Mr. Stott's house. I gave him some gum."

"What about our bikes?"

"Leave them," Summer said. "Denny, Eric, and Kyle have all changed into monsters."

"I saw," Pigeon said.

"I need a destination," the horse interrupted.

“Away from the library along that road,” Pigeon said. “Speed is important.”

“Off we go,” the horse said, breaking into a fast canter. “What’s the plan?”

“I’m hoping you can take us home,” Pigeon called, wind in his face. They passed a police officer standing outside his car, gazing up at the burning barn. It was the same officer who had spoken to Pigeon at the cemetery. He paid them no heed.

“You got it,” the horse said. “I’ve always wanted to see more of the town. I get to walk in the Fourth of July parade, but otherwise I never leave the farm.”

“We really appreciate this,” Summer said.

“Don’t mention it,” the horse laughed. “You’re as light as the other one. I can hardly feel either of you. What a night! This is great, like a jailbreak. Hear the sirens?”

“Turn right up here,” Pigeon instructed as they approached Mayflower, the whine of multiple sirens growing louder.

“Hang on,” the horse said, increasing his gait to a full gallop.

Racing down a sidewalk on the far side of Mayflower, Nate could not believe how easy it was to maintain a full sprint. All his past experience combined to insist that his lungs should be burning, his legs should be aching, his side should be sore. Instead, he felt no more winded than he would on a leisurely stroll, leaving him free to enjoy the exhilaration of the night air in his face as he rushed along a side street in a dark neighborhood.

Before long the night came alive with the cry of sirens, but he doubted whether any of the emergency vehicles would travel the minor residential streets separating him from Mr. Stott’s house. Holding the ship in both hands, he tried to run smoothly enough to avoid making the splits in the hull any worse. The once-handsome ship had sustained some serious damage. Nate just hoped they had not messed up whatever map it contained. He worried about how Mr. Stott might react to the broken masts, tattered sails, crushed hull, and whatever little

pieces had fallen off.

Nate turned down Clover Lane, crossed a few empty streets, and soon found himself on Limerick Court, still running at top speed. It was amazing how much ground you could cover with a tireless sprint!

The sirens were behind him now, their cries waning as they arrived at their destination. Ahead the street was still and dark, no lights in the windows, no cars on the road. Then a light came on as the door of a parked sedan opened down the street, not far from Mr. Stott's house. Nate abandoned the sidewalk and spied on the car from behind a bush.

To his dismay, the big round guy from the candy shop got out. He appeared to converse with somebody before he ducked out of sight. Nate covered his mouth. They were planning to ambush him when he brought the map to Mr. Stott. He had almost sprinted into a trap.

Taking out his cell phone, Nate dialed Mr. Stott. The old magician picked up after a few rings. "Hello?"

"Mr. Stott?" Nate whispered. "Can you hear me?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Mrs. White has her goons guarding your house. I think they're trying to ambush me."

"Are you in immediate danger?"

"No."

"You have the map?" Mr. Stott asked.

"It was rough, but yes, I think so. I have the *Stargazer*."

"Excellent! Nate, just go home. You can bring me the ship in the morning."

"Okay. Talk to you tomorrow."

Nate hung up. Staying low, running across front yards instead of on the

sidewalk, he hurried away from Mr. Stott's. It made Nate glad to think of the big round guy waiting disappointedly for him to show up.

Nate sprinted along side streets until he reached Main. After waiting for a car to pass, he dashed across and cut through Summer's neighborhood. He ran up to Mayflower to avoid the creek, and then rushed along the jogging path toward Monroe Circle, senses alert.

When he reached the bottom of Monroe, Nate saw a gray horse walking down the middle of the street. The sight was so unusual that he retreated into the undergrowth by the creek and fell flat. He watched the horse wander onto the jogging path and clomp away toward Mayflower.

Once the horse was out of sight, Nate raced up the street to his house, flung open the door, and locked it behind him. He rushed around the ground floor, making sure all the windows and doors were locked, then did the same upstairs. He went to his bathroom, where the light remained on, but Trevor was not in the mirror. He flashed the light on and off and waited a moment, but his friend did not appear.

Nate went to his room and set the mangled ship in his closet. The *Stargazer* was a mess, but it was mostly in one piece. Even the broken masts were held to the boat by tangles of netting and string.

Nate took out his cell phone and called Summer. She answered on the second ring. "I'm glad you called," she said. "Did you deliver it?"

"No, the big guy from the candy shop was waiting to ambush me. It seemed like he had others with him. So I came home. I figured my mom could swing me by there on the way to school. Are you and Pidge okay?"

"We rode home on a talking horse," Summer said.

"I think I saw it!" Nate said. "Was it gray?"

"That's the one," Summer said. "He was really friendly."

"Nice use of the Brain Feed."

“We left our bikes behind, which might come back to bite us, but honestly, I’m just relieved we made it. That was scary.”

“I know, what was with the monster candy? It was like Melting Pot Mixers on steroids!”

“It was freaky,” Summer said. “Are you going to school tomorrow?”

“For sure,” Nate said. “With all the people around, school is probably the safest place for us right now.”

“I don’t want to see Denny there,” Summer said.

“Neither do I,” Nate agreed. “You think he’s okay?”

“I’m sure. Eric and Kyle would have been after us faster if they hadn’t been helping him get unstuck.”

“Maybe we can hide out during lunch,” Nate said.

“Bring your candy just in case.”

“Always. Hey, Summer, you were amazing tonight. You saved the day with that Sun Stone.”

“What are friends for?” She sounded very pleased. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yep.”

He hung up.

His digital clock said it was not quite two-thirty. The whole escapade had taken place in less than ninety minutes. Nate spit his gum into the wastebasket by his bookcase and turned off the lights. He leaned back on his bed, told himself he would undress after he rested his eyes for a moment, and faded off to sleep.

Nate snapped awake, certain he had heard glass breaking. His room was dark; the clock read 3:46 a.m. He lay still, straining his ears, hearing only silence. Had it been a dream? He had smashed through a lot of glass earlier in the night—maybe his subconscious had been reliving the adventure.

He could not shake the conviction that the sound had been real, and decided he had better check it out. He reached over, clicked on his reading light, and saw a bubble floating over his bed. Chills raced down his back. It was the size of a baseball, like the bubble they had seen in the alley by the museum, like the bubble Pigeon had described hovering near the Nest.

Transfixed, he stared at the little sphere, uncertain exactly what it meant, knowing it was a bad sign. The floor in the hallway creaked. Terrified, Nate forced himself to move, plunging a hand into his pocket. The bubble streaked out the door. Nate got up, putting an Ironhide in his mouth, watching the doorway, wondering if he should call his parents.

The wrinkled wooden Indian from the candy shop walked into his room, clutching a tomahawk.

Nate screamed as he had never screamed before, an involuntary, desperate wail. The Indian reacted by running at him and hurling him onto his bed. The Indian sprang to the closet, tore open the door, crouched, and seized the *Stargazer*.

“No!” Nate yelled, diving off his bed, wrapping his arms around the painted buckskin jacket. The Indian fell against the wall, a couple of headdress feathers snapping off. Nate reached for the ship, and the Indian elbowed him in the face. The blow knocked him back, but it didn’t hurt, so he hugged the Indian’s legs as the chief tried to rise, and wrenched him to the ground.

The fallen Indian kicked Nate viciously, shoving him backwards, and scrambled across the floor toward the door. Unafraid to use his indestructible body as a projectile, Nate sprang onto his bed and leapt off, hitting the Indian with a flying tackle as he was rising.

The Indian released the *Stargazer*, picked up Nate, and rammed him into the bookcase, upsetting shelves and sending books and trophies cascading to the floor. Again Nate felt no pain and kept struggling, so the Indian clamped him in

a headlock. The chokehold had no effect, and Nate managed to pick up the heavy Indian and thrust his head through the bedroom window. The Indian grabbed the windowsill and pushed off, falling to the floor beside Nate.

“Everything okay, champ?” Nate’s dad asked, standing in the doorway in his undershirt and boxers.

“A wooden Indian is trying to kill me!” Nate hollered.

“It’s just a dream, try to get some shut-eye.”

No longer holding back, the Indian punched Nate in the face. The blow did not hurt, but it had enough force behind it to send him reeling. Nate landed on his hands and knees.

The Indian ran toward the door, grabbed the ship, and knocked over Nate’s dad on the way out. Refusing to admit defeat, Nate gave chase.

“You guys need to settle down,” his dad said as Nate ran by. “Your mom and I are trying to sleep.”

The Indian was quick, but Nate had his chance on the stairs, diving from the top step and colliding with the wooden chief halfway down. They tumbled together, the *Stargazer* crunching beneath them, and landed in a tangle at the end of the staircase.

The Indian again abandoned the *Stargazer* to concentrate on Nate. The chief picked him up, carried him across the room, and flung him through the sliding glass door into the backyard. Nate got up and rushed back inside, chasing the Indian to the front door. When the Indian reached the door, the ship under one arm, Nate lunged, but the Indian turned and chopped him in the side of the head with the tomahawk.

As always, Nate felt no pain, but the fierce impact flung him brutally onto the living room carpeting. The Indian raced out the door. Nate got up and pursued him out onto the street, but soon found that in the open, the Indian ran considerably faster than he did. He gave up and watched the Indian dash to the bottom of the street and turn down the jogging path toward the candy shop.

Nate stared impotently at the empty street. He tried to devise a plan to fix things, but there was nothing he could do. The ship was gone.

He trudged back into his house, closing the front door. Cool air wafted in through the glassless sliding door. He pulled the curtain shut in front of it. A window in the family room was broken as well, presumably where the Indian had entered.

Nate climbed the stairs. He peeked into his parents' room.

"No more friends over on school nights," his dad stated in a harsh whisper.

"Okay," Nate said.

He returned to his room. Nate wanted to cry, but no tears would come. He had no idea what he would tell Summer and Pigeon, what he would tell Mr. Stott, what he would tell Trevor. He had failed everyone. Now Mrs. White had the advantage. If she found the treasure first, they were all doomed.

Nate plopped down on his bed, taking in the disaster his room had become. He spit out the Ironhide.

The *Stargazer* was gone.

The Substitute



The train of cars rolled forward a little at a time. Nate clutched the cell phone Mr. Stott had given him. The power was off in order to avoid receiving a call. His mom pulled forward, finally getting her turn alongside the curb at the front of Mt. Diablo Elementary.

“Here we are,” she said. “Remember, come straight home after school.”

“I will,” Nate said.

He opened the door and got out, shouldering his backpack. His parents had concluded that the house was trashed because Nate had had friends over late. They had grounded him for a week. No television, no friends. In a way, he was glad they had at least noticed something, even if they had it all wrong.

Caught up in the flow of kids flooding into the school, Nate debated skipping his class. He wanted to hitchhike to San Francisco and stow away on a cargo ship bound for the Southern Hemisphere. Or maybe hop a train to a distant city and check himself into an orphanage. Or even just roam off into the wilderness, build a shack, and start a new life as a mysterious hermit. Anything to avoid admitting that the *Stargazer* had been stolen by Mrs. White.

In rebellion against his grandiose schemes, Nate’s treacherous feet carried him toward his classroom. He looked at the cell phone. Should he call Mr. Stott? The sooner he confessed, the sooner they could formulate new plans. He put the phone away. He would tell Summer and Pigeon first; then they could all go tell Mr. Stott in person after school.

Nate entered Miss Doulin's classroom. He slouched into his seat, wondering how he was supposed to sit through another unprepared lesson, considering all the stress he was under. Only then did he notice that Miss Doulin was not sitting at the desk at the front of the class.

In her place sat a broad-shouldered man in an overcoat wearing a brown fedora with a black band. He had a strong jaw and heavy eyebrows. Nate instantly recognized him as the man who had chased him on the night they had stolen the pocket watch from the museum. Fear flooded through him. Somehow the man had tracked them down! Nate glanced over at Summer and Pigeon, already in their seats and looking as uncomfortable as he felt.

The bell rang.

Using a cane, the man stood up and limped to the chalkboard. Taking a piece of chalk from the tray, he wrote MR. DART in large capital letters before turning to regard the class.

"I'm Mr. Dart," he said in a confident voice. "Today I'll be standing in for Miss Doulin, who I am told was not feeling well. As long as you keep it to a low roar, I'll basically leave you alone to read or study or do whatever floats your boat. But first I want to share a few thoughts on an important subject."

He turned back to the chalkboard, erased his name, and wrote in imposing letters: DON'T TAKE CANDY FROM STRANGERS!

Nate squirmed.

"Now, that may not seem like news to anyone," Mr. Dart said. "This message, in various forms, has been drilled into children across many cultures for centuries. Why do you suppose this message gets repeated?"

April Flynn raised her hand. Mr. Dart nodded at her.

"Because strangers might lure you into their car to kidnap you," April said.

"A common response, and a real threat," Mr. Dart said. "Or maybe the stranger tampered with the candy and made it unsafe. I want to propose a lesser

known reason. There are magicians in the world who are capable of creating powerful spells that work only on children. They blend these enchantments with candy to entice youngsters. These magicians consider children a disposable resource. They put kids in danger, get what they can from them, and then cast them aside when their usefulness has passed. None of these magicians can be trusted. They are not a new phenomenon. Some of the oldest children's tales contain warnings about them. Who knows the story of Hansel and Gretel?"

Several hands went up.

John Dart continued as if he had not asked the question. "Two children get lost in the woods and stumble upon a delicious house made of candy. Attracted by the sweets, the kids are captured by a witch, who continues feeding them treats. Why? The witch is fattening them up so she can eat them."

Mr. Dart paused, staring at Nate, who dropped his gaze to his hands.

"Moral of the story? Don't take candy from strangers. You can find similar warnings in other tales. My message today is: Do not trust magicians who exploit children for gain."

Walt Gunther timidly raised his hand. Mr. Dart nodded at him.

"Are you sort of making up a fairy tale?" he asked, sounding concerned that Mr. Dart might be insane.

Mr. Dart smiled. "Something like that. I'm trying to prove a point to anyone who might be feeling confused about the issue. If any of you want to talk with me more on the subject, I'll be at my desk. Otherwise, find a task to perform quietly."

Mr. Dart returned to the desk and sat down. He took out a pen and began writing in a notebook.

Nate tapped his desk nervously with his pen. Whatever Mr. Dart was doing here, it was clear that he knew about the magicians and the candy. There was no point in trying to act naive. The man was on to them. It would be better to confront him directly. Mustering his courage, Nate got up and walked to the front of the room.

Mr. Dart looked up from his notebook. "Pull up a chair."

Nate grabbed a chair, glancing over at Summer and Pigeon. Summer pointed at herself and then at Mr. Dart. Nate shook his head. He did not want Summer or Pigeon to reveal themselves until he learned more about the unexpected substitute.

Nate sat down by Mr. Dart. "Do you know me?" Nate asked quietly.

"I do," Mr. Dart said in a deep, hard voice. "I don't know all the details, but I know you're in way over your head. If you'll fill me in, I can help."

"How do I know you're different from any of the other magicians?"

Mr. Dart almost smiled. "First of all, I'm no magician. Second, I'm not after what they're after. I'm only here to stop them. Third, unlike them, I'll tell you everything I know once I'm convinced you're on my side."

Nate rubbed his knees. "If that's all true, I may talk to you. But first you need to prove yourself."

Mr. Dart leaned back in his chair, thick fingers brushing the brim of his hat. "Look, I wouldn't be here if I didn't have a hunch you were basically a good kid. Belinda can be sly. She could cajole an honest kid into serving her. It seems clear you caught on to what she really is and that you were trying to fight back. Without help, it's a fight you'll lose. My guess is you're involved with Sebastian as well."

"He seems like a pretty good guy," Nate said.

Mr. Dart exhaled sharply, not quite a chuckle. "Compared to Belinda, yes, he is the lesser of two evils. But I expect he is keeping secrets, just as she did. Has he even told you what he is after?"

"An ancient treasure," Nate said.

"What ancient treasure?"

Nate shrugged.

“Do you understand that most of the treats these magicians prepare for you would not work on themselves? They’re too old. It’s the catch-22 of magic.”

“Mr. Stott explained that.”

“Do you understand that the unattainable miracle all magicians pursue is the ability to reduce their age? They can prolong their years, but they can’t make themselves a second younger. If these wise old magicians could only turn back the clock, their power would increase exponentially.”

“I sort of knew that, I guess.”

Mr. Dart leaned closer and lowered his voice a little more. “Then it might interest you to know that the prize Belinda White and Sebastian Stott are seeking is a draught from the Fountain of Youth. Funny how neither of them mentioned it. Chew on that for a minute, and see if Sebastian still strikes you as such a nice guy.”

Nate nodded thoughtfully. “Why do you care?”

By the look on his face, Nate sensed that Mr. Dart approved of the question. “I’m no magician, but magicians know me. I help keep them in line. I’ve fulfilled some important assignments, but nothing tops this. If either Belinda or Sebastian drinks that water and reverts to a younger state, it will be a really big problem. I’m not just talking about a problem for magicians, I’m talking about a problem for all humankind.”

“How do I know this isn’t a setup? You could be working for Mrs. White.”

“Before we were formally introduced, I broke my leg helping you escape Mrs. White. I shot the dwarf.”

“That was you in the car!”

“The dwarf was an Energizer. A Kinetic. He can store and release mechanical energy inside his body—jump with the force of fifty jumps, that sort of thing. He was storing up to follow you onto the roof of that antique store, so I simultaneously shot him with a rubber bullet and a crossbow. The quarrel from

the crossbow struck him in the leg.” Mr. Dart smiled. “Sort of knocked him off-kilter, and he leapt into the wall. Little guy busted himself up pretty good.”

“How’d you break your leg?”

Mr. Dart studied him. He reached into a pocket of his coat and put a toothpick in his mouth. “I’ve been around long enough, my weakness is no big secret, although I’m never anxious to draw attention to it. I receive any injury that I directly inflict upon another. I punch you in the face, my nose bleeds. I break your leg, mine breaks too. I kill you . . . I die.”

“Whoa,” Nate said. “So you broke the dwarf’s leg with the crossbow, and your leg broke! What about when the dwarf jumped into the wall?”

“That didn’t count. He stored up and released the energy himself.”

“Were you born like that?”

“I used to be an enforcer for the mob,” Mr. Dart said. “We’re talking back in the twenties. One time, we leaned on a guy who happened to be a magician. Not just any magician—pretty much the cream of the crop. We had no idea. He got the upper hand and killed the two guys I was working with. I was next. But he held off. He looks at me strangely and says, ‘You’ve never killed a man.’ I say, ‘That’s right.’ He says, ‘You’ve been using your gifts for unworthy purposes.’ I say, ‘Maybe.’ He says, ‘I killed the killers, but I’ll offer you a way out. Not an easy way out, but a chance to live, a new life.’ I ended up agreeing to his terms.”

“What were they?” Nate asked, fascinated.

“He cursed me so that I would suffer whatever physical harm I inflicted on others. The curse slowed down my aging process—I age more gradually than most magicians, even. And the curse sped up how fast my body heals. This leg will be perfectly mended in a couple of days, even though the dwarf will be lame for months. After placing the curse, the spell caster introduced me to a person in charge of policing magicians, and I have done this job ever since.”

“You went from criminal to policeman,” Nate said.

“Something like that. I’m not proud of my unlawful background. True, I never

killed a man, but certain memories make me cringe. I may have been raised wrong, but I should have known better. The curse was just. I try to make up for my past errors by doing this job right.”

“Why did you chase us the night we broke into the museum?” Nate asked.

“As far as I knew, you were in league with Belinda. I was just trying to gather information. You’ll notice, I didn’t hurt any of you. I could have.”

Nate stared at him. “I’ll admit, you’re starting to convince me.”

“I’m telling the truth,” Mr. Dart said. “I can tell you more, but you need to meet me halfway. I need to know we’re on the same side. I can’t have the info I share with you leaking back to my enemies.”

“Okay, we’re getting close to the treasure,” Nate said. “A guy named Hanaver Mills left clues.”

“Hanaver is how my organization knows about the treasure,” Mr. Dart said. “We believe he found it, but chose to help keep it hidden. He did not share exactly where it was located, although he told us what it was. Since my organization is run by magicians, we left the treasure alone. To claim it, even to hide it, would have been a conflict of interest. But somehow word finally leaked out. Now I have to plug the leak.”

“You better hurry,” Nate said. “Mrs. White stole the map to the treasure from me last night.”

“You had a map!” Mr. Dart said, losing his composure for the first time. “Do you know the location of the treasure room?”

“The map was supposedly hidden inside a model ship built by Hanaver,” Nate explained. “We stole the ship from the town library, but before we could investigate it, Mrs. White used a wooden Indian to steal the ship from my house.”

Mr. Dart scrawled something in his notebook. “She may already know the position of the treasure. Are other kids still working for her?”

“The four of us who you chased that night at the museum quit working for her and started helping Mr. Stott,” Nate said. “But she recruited three bullies from our school who are now helping her.”

“Who are they?” Mr. Dart asked.

“Denny Clegg, Eric Andrews, and Kyle Knowles.”

“Could you point them out to me?”

“Sure.”

“What about the others working for Stott? How loyal are they?”

Nate glanced over at Summer. “We should bring them in on this. One is trapped as a reflection. The others are in this room, and, like me, they just want all of this to be over. If we help you, we need you to help us get our friend out of the mirror realm.”

“I’ll try my best,” Mr. Dart said. “I had no idea anybody still knew how to access the space where reflections dwell.”

“I’ve been there,” Nate said.

“Well, yes, I’ll do everything in my power to rescue your friend, and I’ll not be claiming the water from the Fountain of Youth, or any of the other treasure. You would be welcome to destroy it. If there is gold, you would be welcome to keep it. I’m just here to stop the magicians from acquiring it.”

“Hold on a second,” Nate said.

He walked to Summer’s desk and waved Pigeon over. “What’s his story?” Summer asked.

Nate took a deep breath. “First off, I have something to confess. I lost the *Stargazer*. The wooden Indian from the candy shop broke into my house and stole it. I tried to stop him, but he was too strong.”

“Then Mrs. White has the map,” Pigeon said.

“I’m sorry,” Nate said.

“That must have been scary,” Summer said.

“It was the worst,” Nate said. “My dad was watching and didn’t even get what was happening. He thought I was roughhousing with friends. He just wanted me to quiet down.”

“I’m sure you tried your best,” Pigeon said. “I’m just glad the Indian wasn’t in my house.”

“I think this guy is for real,” Nate said, tilting his head toward Mr. Dart. He recapped all the information John Dart had told him. “I know it’s hard, but I don’t see that we have any options except to trust him.”

“Wow,” Summer said. “I’d say we’re lucky he found us. He may be our only hope.”

“That’s what I think,” Nate said. “If it’s a trick, it’s the best one yet. He might actually be able to get us out of this.”

“You really think Mr. Stott is a bad guy?” Pigeon asked.

“Mr. Dart said that Mr. Stott isn’t bad like Mrs. White, but that he could become dangerous if he drinks from the Fountain of Youth. Considering that Mr. Stott didn’t tell us what the treasure was, my guess is he plans to drink it. I think Mr. Dart is our safest bet.”

“I’m in,” Pigeon said. “Let’s talk to him.”

“Is that Denny?” Summer said, staring at a window near the door.

Nate turned and made brief eye contact with the bully. Nate, Summer, and Pigeon hurried to the window in time to see Denny running off. They shared a worried look.

“What was he up to?” Pigeon asked.

“I don’t know,” Nate muttered.

The three kids approached John Dart's desk.

"What was that about?" Mr. Dart asked.

"One of the bullies working for Mrs. White was peeking in the window," Nate reported. "Denny. Do you think he could have heard us?"

"No," Mr. Dart said. "But it would make sense for Belinda to spy on you. I doubt he could have recognized me, but we'll have to be careful."

"This is Summer and Pigeon," Nate said.

"The Japanese girl and the black kid," Mr. Dart said. "I'm John Dart. Call me John if you like. What other leads do we have?"

"The other big one is a clue left by Hanaver Mills," Nate said. "The House of Haag holds the key."

"That is a big lead," John said. "What do we know about the Haag family in Colson?"

"Mr. Stott said there are at least twenty Haags in town," Nate said. "He's been working on narrowing down the list."

"Does Belinda know about the Haags?" John asked.

"No," Pigeon said.

"So Sebastian knows about the Haags but lacks the map, while Belinda has the map but knows nothing about the Haag family," John summarized.

"Right," Nate said.

"What about henchmen?" John asked. "Who's working for Sebastian?"

"All I know about is a weird mutant called the Flatman," Nate said. "Mr. Stott called him an engineered apprentice."

"I've heard of the Flatman," John said. "Sebastian never worked with many associates. What about Belinda?"

“Obviously the dwarf,” Nate said. “She also has a fat guy who can spit orange jelly. And maybe a guy with a huge birthmark.”

“Engineered apprentices,” John said. “We call the fat guy a Gusher, or a Sloggut. He has a symbiotic relationship with the gel inside of him. He can expel it in order to entrap or smother victims. The man with the birthmark is a Fuse. Every Fuse has different magical specialties. Each time he calls on his power, the birthmark spreads. When the mark covers his entire body, he dies. Hence the name. I actually captured the Fuse a few days ago. He won’t talk, but at least he’s out of play. What else can you tell me?”

Summer, Nate, and Pigeon exchanged glances. “That’s about it,” Pigeon said.

“We still have some candy from both of them,” Nate said. “You might find us more useful than normal kids. We’ll do whatever it takes to get Trevor back.”

“I’ll be honest, I’m not much of a babysitter,” John said. “I’ve always liked the idea of children a lot more than the reality. But you three seem okay. I can definitely use your help to gather information. I’ll try my best to keep you out of harm’s way. Our first step will be to nab one of your bully friends and find out what he knows. I’ll need you to point them out to me at the first opportunity. For now, go back to your desks. I look forward to working with you.”

Nate returned to his seat.

Heather Nielson leaned over and whispered, “Is he as weird as he seems?”

“You can’t imagine.”

Fourth, fifth, and sixth grade kids flocked to the lunch tables. Seagulls wheeled and plunged overhead. One of the few clouds in the sky moved in front of the hot sun, providing temporary shade.

Nate, Summer, and Pigeon waited at one side of the lunch area. Beside them John Dart took a long drink from a bottle of Dr. Pepper. They had failed to spot Denny, Eric, or Kyle during first recess, and had begun to worry the boys might

have ditched school. Just because they had seen Denny earlier did not guarantee that he had stuck around.

“It’s convenient that you’re a substitute teacher,” Nate said, making conversation.

“I’m not,” John said.

“How’d you get in here?” Pigeon asked.

“This morning at around five I went to Miss Doulin’s house, tied her up, and shut her in a closet. She’ll be fine. I grabbed her keys, skipped talking to anybody in the office, and took over her class. Helps that most of the faculty and office staff are on white fudge.”

“There they are,” Pigeon said, pointing out Denny and Eric. They had hot-lunch trays, and settled down together at a table full of sixth graders.

“No sign of the third one?” John asked.

They waited a few minutes, but Kyle did not join the others.

“Which of those two has the weaker will?” John asked.

“Eric,” Summer said. “The kid sitting on the left. The other one, Denny, is pretty tough.”

“You three go have lunch in the classroom. Here’s the key.”

“What are you going to do?” Nate asked.

“You’ll see,” John said.

Nate, Summer, and Pigeon returned to the classroom. They pushed three desks together and ate their lunches.

“I’m grounded,” Nate said.

“Why?” Pigeon asked.

“In my fight with the Indian I trashed the house. Smashed my bookcase, shattered the window in my room, pulverized the sliding glass door. Fortunately I was sucking on an Ironhide. My parents somehow decided I’d had friends over and we had vandalized everything. I’m supposed to go directly home after school.”

“You got busted even with them on the fudge?” Pigeon asked, sounding a little nervous.

“Yeah, but they had it all wrong,” Nate said. “It took me wrestling a wooden Indian in front of my dad and doing severe damage to the house to even get noticed.”

John entered the room. “You kids want to leave school early?” He walked to the front of the room, leaning on his cane. He erased DON’T TAKE CANDY FROM STRANGERS! and replaced it with STUDY QUIETLY UNTIL I RETURN.

“You’re not returning,” Pigeon guessed.

“Not very likely,” John admitted. “Hurry up, I have Eric in the trunk.”

“You’re kidnapping him?” Summer asked.

“Don’t worry, I took away all of his candy,” John said. “Trust me, we’re doing the weasel a favor. We’ll take him home safe and sound when this is over.”

Nate, Summer, and Pigeon collected their backpacks and followed John to the front of the school. He was driving an old Buick. The exterior was clean although the paint was chipped and scratched.

“Shotgun,” Nate said, climbing into the front seat and sitting on the dry, cracked upholstery.

“Nine-millimeter handgun, actually, modified to shoot darts,” John said, sliding in and starting the car. “Buckle up.”

“Mine doesn’t work,” Pigeon said.

“Sit in the middle,” John said.

Pigeon scooted over and buckled the lap belt.

“Where are we going?” Nate asked.

“The Paradise Inn,” John said.

“Isn’t that kind of a dump?” Pigeon asked.

“My third dive since hitting town,” John said, turning onto Oak Grove Avenue. “We may have to make an extra stop before then. You kids have a traveling eye monitoring you.”

“Traveling eye?” Pigeon asked.

“Some magicians can send a traveling eye to help them spy on distant events. This one looks like a bubble.”

“I’ve seen it before!” Pigeon said.

“It showed up in my room before the Indian took the *Stargazer*,” Nate said.

“Then the eye belongs to Belinda,” John said. “Reach under your seat.”

Nate reached under his seat and pulled out a crossbow. Instead of an arrow, the string held a small cup covered by a leather cap. It looked ready to fire.

“The weapon shoots forty silver pellets,” John said. “I typically use it for other purposes, but it should get this job done. Have any of you kids ever fired a crossbow?”

The kids were silent.

“How about a rifle?”

Nate and Pigeon shook their heads.

“I have,” Summer said. “My grandpa took me.”

“I can’t afford to shoot the eye myself,” John said. He pulled into a large

parking lot adjacent to a supermarket and several smaller stores, including a tanning salon, a Chinese buffet, and a copy shop. He parked in a vacant area near the back of the lot. "Nate, give Summer the crossbow. Summer, the eye is above and behind us to the right. It may be hard to identify against the blue sky. Aim by putting the bead at the front of the crossbow into the notch at the rear and lining it up with the target. You'll get only one shot."

"Then I'd better use some of this," Summer said, inserting a stick of Peak Performance gum into her mouth.

John reached back and released a mechanism on the crossbow. "The safety is off," he said. "Ready? On three. One . . . two . . . three!"

Summer pushed open her door, stepped out, and aimed the heavy crossbow. The baseball-sized bubble hovered right where John had described, about thirty feet off the ground, barely visible. Holding her breath, she pulled the trigger. The cup lurched forward, the leather cap slid off, and a cloud of pellets were catapulted into the air.

The bubble burst, and a red smear appeared on the parking lot beneath it. John got out and took a look at the smear. "Great job," he said, patting Summer on the back. "You shot her eye out. She'll think twice before sending the other one after us."

"You mean she actually lost an eye?" Summer asked.

"That's the risk she took," John said, taking the crossbow from her. "Hurry, hop in the car." He climbed behind the wheel and passed the unusual crossbow to Nate, who stowed it under the seat.

John revved the engine. Peeling out, they swerved back onto the street and drove away at well beyond the speed limit.

House of Haag



The Paradise Inn consisted of a two-story horseshoe of rooms wrapped around a weedy parking lot. Opposite the office was a small gated swimming pool, deserted except for a few dirty deck chairs. A sun-bleached *Temporarily Out of Service* sign hung on the battered ice machine. The marquee bragged about the swimming pool and the cable TV.

John pulled the Buick into a spot and killed the engine. There were only three other cars in the lot. He got out, looked around, opened the trunk, and hauled Eric over to room 6. Stabbing a key into the lock, John thrust the door open.

The air-conditioning unit below the window was working hard to keep the room cool. John sat Eric on the edge of the bed. Eric looked sweaty and scared.

“I’m going to make this simple, Eric,” John said. “You’ve become involved with a wanted criminal. If you don’t tell me all you can about everything she is doing, you will never see anyone you love again.”

“Who are you?” Eric asked, not very defiantly.

“You don’t want to know,” John said.

John stalked over to the closet and opened it. The man with the lurid birthmark sat inside wearing a straitjacket, duct tape over his mouth. John pulled a straitjacket off of a shelf and closed the door. Eric watched gravely.

“Ever try one of these on?” John asked, unfolding the straitjacket.

Eric shook his head.

“Funny thing,” John said. “Take a sane person, put on a straitjacket, and it isn’t long before he starts acting absolutely nuts. Let’s see how it fits.”

“I’ll tell you stuff,” Eric said.

“Start with the map,” John recommended.

“I haven’t seen it,” Eric said. “She told us about it this morning. She said it was written on a piece of vellum she found in the ship’s cabin.”

“Vellum?” Pigeon asked.

Eric shrugged.

“Specially treated calfskin,” John clarified. “Lasts for centuries. Go on.”

“Mrs. White said she had to read it under a microscope. She said the treasure is somewhere beneath the school.”

“Your school?” John asked. “Mt. Diablo?”

Eric nodded. “She wanted us to start checking out the school for underground tunnels. We haven’t found anything yet. That’s all I know.”

“Why wasn’t your friend Kyle at school?” John asked.

“I don’t know,” Eric said. “Maybe he was tired. He wasn’t with us this morning.”

“You guys got out of the barn okay?” Summer asked.

“No thanks to you losers,” Eric said. “Denny almost bought it. He couldn’t move, and we couldn’t budge him. The roof was starting to come down when the candy finally wore off.”

“What else can you tell me?” John probed. “Think hard. You’re not just helping yourself, you’re helping Denny and Kyle. You boys don’t want to be

mixed up with Belinda White, especially if she gains the power this treasure would grant her.”

“That’s all I know,” Eric said.

“I hope so.” John shook the straitjacket. “We can do this either of two ways: You can cooperate, or I can force you. The jacket really isn’t as bad as I was saying. I don’t plan to keep you here long.”

“I’ll cooperate.”

John helped Eric into the straitjacket and duct-taped his mouth. “Have a seat in the bathroom for now,” John said. “Unless you want to have a staring contest with the Fuse.”

Eric went compliantly into the bathroom.

John, Nate, Summer, and Pigeon huddled together. “Are there any Haags affiliated with your school?” John asked.

“Gary Haag is the custodian,” Pigeon said. “And there’s a third-grade teacher named Mr. Haag.”

“Are they related?” John asked.

“I don’t think so,” Pigeon said. “At least not closely.”

“Do either of them have older relatives who once worked at the school?”

None of the kids had an answer. John started thumbing through a worn phone book.

“Nate, lend me your cell phone,” John said. Nate handed over the phone, and John punched in a number. “Hi, yes, my son is in Mr. Haag’s third-grade class. I have an emergency situation on my hands. Is there any way I could speak with Mr. Haag? He isn’t? No, that’s all right. Remind me, what is Mr. Haag’s first name? That’s right. Thanks a lot.” John returned the phone to Nate. “Mr. Haag is out today. Considering all that has been happening, his absence could mean a lot. Summer, call the school from the motel phone. Ask if Mr. Haag the custodian is in. You’re his niece.”

Summer crossed to the phone and picked it up. John told her the number and she dialed it. “Yes, is Mr. Haag the custodian there today? This is his niece. You did? No, no message, thanks.” Summer hung up. “She saw him there like half an hour ago.”

John started flipping through the phone book again. Finding the desired page, he ran a finger down a column of names. “Lester Haag,” he said, tapping the entry. “Gotcha. Any of you three familiar with the custodian?”

“I know him pretty well,” Pigeon said. “He’s a nice guy. He was extra friendly back when nobody talked to me.”

“We’ll drop you at the school, Pigeon,” John said. “Find out if the custodian had ancestors working there before him. If the moment feels right, ask about the key. If all else fails, find out if he is aware of any old passageways under the schools. The rest of us will pay Lester Haag a visit. My gut tells me Lester is our man.”

“How’d you catch the Fuse?” Nate asked.

“Snuck up behind him when he was out alone one night,” John said. “Not very gentlemanly, but so it goes. He can’t access his power if I keep him gagged.”

“What should we do about Eric?” Summer asked, inclining her head toward the bathroom.

“Give me one minute to make him more secure,” John said. He opened the closet, removed a length of rope, and disappeared into the bathroom. When John returned he reached under the mattress and pulled out a dart gun. He took a large crossbow from under the bed and a pair of throwing stars from a drawer. Grabbing the phone book, he strode swiftly to the door. “Away we go.”

Nate, Summer, and Pigeon collected their backpacks and followed him out. John locked the door.

“Where’d you get all the weapons?” Nate asked.

“I know a guy,” John said.

“If you can’t kill people, why the huge arsenal?” Nate pursued.

“Weapons are what I know. Apart from my curse, there’s nothing magical about me. I can use them for intimidation. I can use them to wound an enemy. I use tranquilizer darts and non-lethal bullets. My curse only applies to humans. If a magician conjures up creatures, or has familiar animals, I’m free to dispatch them. And, if the situation warrants, I can slay a single enemy. The price is just really steep.”

They drove in silence and soon reached the school. Class would not let out for another hour.

“Pigeon,” John said, “you know how to call Nate’s cell phone?”

“Yeah.”

“Here’s some change.” John opened an ashtray and handed Pigeon several quarters. “Call when you know something, or if you need anything.”

“You got it,” Pigeon said. “Good luck with Lester.”

The Buick drove away.

Pigeon walked hesitantly into the school. He had never roamed Mt. Diablo Elementary during school hours without a hall pass. He hurried along the covered walkways, keeping an eye out for a custodial cart outside the rest rooms.

Aware that the custodian’s office was by the cafeteria, Pigeon headed that way first. He entered the empty cafeteria and saw that the door to the custodian’s office was closed. He ran over and gave a quick knock.

“Come in,” said a voice.

Placing a Sweet Tooth in his mouth, Pigeon opened the door and stepped inside. Gary Haag sat with his feet on his desk, balancing a clipboard on his lap.

“Hey, Gary,” Pigeon said.

“Pigeon, how are you?” He dropped his feet and stood up. “Can I help you

with something?”

“I have kind of a weird question,” Pigeon said.

“Shoot,” Gary said.

“Do you have any relatives who worked here before you?”

“Yeah, my uncle used to be the custodian. He scored me my first job here. Why?”

“Just curious. Did he have any family who worked here before him?”

Gary gave Pigeon an unusual stare. Almost always a laid-back guy, he suddenly seemed suspicious. “He did. Why are you curious about that, Pigeon?”

“Do you know anything about a key?”

Gary got up, went to the door, peered out, and then shut it. “I have lots of keys. Why are you asking about a key, Pigeon?”

“A special key. A key your family protects.”

Gary paled. His lips twitched. “You shouldn’t talk about keys.”

“I know about the treasure under the school,” Pigeon said.

Gary closed his eyes and rubbed them. He leaned against the door. “I know what you’re talking about, Pigeon, but I’m not sure you do.”

“I do,” Pigeon said. “A lot of people here in town are after that key. You wouldn’t believe what kind of people. I’m not one of the bad guys, I’m here to help.”

Gary sighed. “Pigeon, when my great-uncle gave me the key, he warned me that one day somebody might come asking about it. He told me I had to kill that person.”

It took Pigeon a moment to muster a response. “Gary, no, I’m not trying to steal the treasure.”

“I hear you, Pigeon, but this is serious business. I may not come across as the sharpest knife in the drawer, but when it comes to the key, I don’t mess around. The lives of my whole family are tied to that key.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’d never believe me.”

“I’ve seen some crazy stuff lately,” Pigeon insisted. “Real magicians, candy that gives you powers, talking animals. I’ll believe you.”

Gary crossed his arms. “My family has protected the key for well over a hundred years. My great-great-great-grandfather Ebner Haag originally took on the responsibility. All of his direct descendents are held accountable. Only a few of us know about it. My great-uncle guarded the key for about forty years, then passed it to me. Pigeon, if you put the key in an oven, my family gets feverish. If you put the key in the cold, we start freezing. If you put the key under water, nobody in my family can breathe. I’ve seen it or I wouldn’t believe it. My uncle tossed the key in a sink, and I started drowning. If the key fell into the wrong hands, somebody could kill us all, or at least blackmail us. Pigeon, unless I protect the key, we’ll all suffer. And if anyone in my family uses the key to unlock the door . . . we all die.”

“Be glad I found you first,” Pigeon said. “There are powerful magicians who have almost figured out you have the key. I’m working with a guy named John Dart to keep them from stealing the treasure.”

Gary rubbed a finger back and forth against his nostrils. Tears glistened in his eyes. “I can’t do what my uncle said. I don’t want to kill anybody, Pigeon. I really don’t.”

“Then don’t,” Pigeon said. “You can trust this John Dart guy. He won’t let anybody harm your family.”

“No, Pigeon, I can’t trust anybody with this,” Gary said. “I have to leave town. Look, I believe that you stumbled into this unluckily. I don’t know what to do. I can’t let you share what you know.”

“Gary, lots of people know I’m here! They know all about you! You lose nothing by letting me go.”

“I could lose time,” Gary murmured. “Look, I won’t hurt you, I believe you mean no harm, but I need to tie you up while I get away. Go sit in that chair.”

Pigeon obeyed. “You should consider letting John Dart help you. I don’t think you can hide from these magicians.”

“I have a place in mind, and people who can help me,” Gary said. He started using an extension cord to bind Pigeon to the chair.

“Please don’t make it too tight,” Pigeon said. “I have sensitive skin.”

“Somebody will find you,” Gary said, winding the cord snugly around Pigeon’s chest and arms. “If you know what’s best, you’ll keep your mouth shut. If others are looking for me, let them do it on their own. If they hear about me from you, I promise, I’ll make you pay.”

He snagged another extension cord and started working on Pigeon’s legs. Pigeon begged, “Gary, don’t leave me here like this.”

“Be glad you’re alive,” Gary said. “Don’t try to get out. Let somebody find you.”

Gary finished binding his legs and used a rag to gag him. “Sit tight, Pigeon. I’m sorry about this.” He hurried out of the room, shutting the door.

As soon as the door closed, Pigeon started struggling. It soon became apparent that squirming free was going to take a lot of work. Despite his plea, the cords were quite tight. The gag trapped the Sweet Tooth in his mouth, and Pigeon began to feel like he was going to choke, so he chewed it as best he could and swallowed. The action seemed to cause no harm.

Jerking with his whole body, Pigeon began hopping the chair closer to the desk. The telephone was not far from the front edge. The chair was low enough, and he was short enough, that his head was not much higher than the phone. The cords were not wound high enough to prevent Pigeon from craning his neck.

By doggedly inching forward, he managed to position the chair close to the desk at an angle that allowed him to touch the phone with his face by tilting his head forward and sideways. He nudged the handset off the cradle, then began pecking numbers with his nose, proud that he remembered to dial 9 first for an outside line.

After pecking the final number, Pigeon leaned his ear as close to the handset as he could. He heard it ringing.

“Hello?” Nate answered.

“Ate!” Pigeon grunted, trying his best to enunciate in spite of the gag.

“Pigeon?”

“Ary as a ee!”

“What?”

“Ary as a ee!”

“Gary has the key?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where are you? Why do you sound like that?”

“Urry oo is ouse,” Pigeon grunted.

“Hurry to his house?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Where are—”

The line went dead. Had the cell phone dropped the call? Straining forward, Pigeon pressed his nose to the cradle and hung up the phone. There was no dial tone. He pecked 9. Still no dial tone.

He caught a flicker of motion on the floor. Turning his head, he saw the little

plastic surgeon doll running toward the door. Pigeon yelled at it, his cry muffled by the gag.

The doll paused near the door and faced him. Pigeon struggled against the extension cords to no avail. The doll pointed at Pigeon's backpack, saluted, fell flat, and wormed under the door.

Pigeon lurched wildly against the extension cords. He had to get free! They had been spying on him! They knew everything he knew! The chair tipped over sideways. The painful shock of the fall left him momentarily dazed. The extension cords remained snug. From his uncomfortable position, Pigeon stared at the unplugged phone cord.

"Pigeon? You there? Pigeon? I lost him!" Nate hung up the phone and thumbed over to the received calls menu.

"Gary has the key?" Summer asked.

"That's what he told me," Nate said, calling Pigeon back. There was no answer. "He could hardly speak."

"Is he in trouble?"

"Sounded like it."

Nate and Summer were seated in the Buick a block away from Lester Haag's house. John had gone ahead alone to scout it out. Nate tried calling Pigeon again.

"We better get John," Summer said.

"Pigeon said we should hurry to Gary's house," Nate said. He put away the cell phone. "Whatever line he called on is suddenly out of commission."

"I'll grab John," Summer said.

"I'm coming," Nate said.

They got out of the Buick and hurried along Ingrim Place until they reached 2225, a modest home with a basketball hoop out front.

“Think he’s inside?” Summer asked.

“John?” Nate called in a loud whisper. “John?” There was no answer. “Let’s try the door.”

They ran up to the porch, knocked, and waited. Nate was reaching for the doorbell when the door whipped open. John was down on one knee, crossbow ready. “I said to stay in the car,” John said, lowering the weapon.

“We got a call from Pigeon,” Nate said. “He could hardly talk, like his mouth was taped shut. He said Gary has the key. He said we should hurry to his house.”

“Did he give an address?” John said, rushing from the house, running awkwardly, stabbing the ground with his cane to help support his left leg.

“No,” Nate said, chasing John down the street.

“You’d think after eighty years on the job I’d have better instincts,” John grumbled. “Looked like the Lester Haag family was on vacation.”

When they arrived at the car, John tore open the phone book. He leafed through several pages, eyes intense. His finger traced down a column of names. “Gary,” John said. “You two ever hear of Rosario Court?” Nate and Summer shook their heads. John yanked a map from the glove compartment and unfolded it. “Help me look.”

The three of them huddled over the map of Colson, scanning street names. “Here,” Summer said, poking the map.

“Good eyes,” John said, tossing the map into the back and diving into the car. He started the engine before he was situated, grabbing for his seatbelt as they accelerated down the road. He ran a stop sign. Swerving onto a bigger road, he cut off a minivan, earning a prolonged honk. After getting pinned at a red light, he raced around an empty school bus, took a left onto a smaller street, and zoomed through a neighborhood at an irresponsible speed. A few more turns, tires whining, and they found themselves on Rosario Court, a short street

bordered by twelve good-sized, two-story houses.

John pulled into a sloped driveway. “That could have been worse,” he said. “Sit tight.” Leaving the keys in the ignition, he got out and dashed toward the front door, using his cane to pole-vault onto the porch. Nate and Summer watched from the car.

Holding his crossbow behind his back, John pounded the door. A skinny woman with short graying hair answered. John spoke. The woman laughed and touched his arm, using her hands expressively as she replied. John said something else, and she said something back. He said a few more words and limped away from the door, keeping the crossbow hidden.

John slid into the driver’s seat. “This is the home of Gary senior,” he said, backing out of the driveway. “His son Gary the custodian is unlisted. He lives at 3488 Winding Way.”

“Near our school,” Summer said.

“My fault,” John growled. “Sloppy . . . slow.”

The engine revved as they ignored another stop sign.

Methodically, persistently, trapped awkwardly on his side, Pigeon tried to wriggle free of the extension cords that trussed him to the chair. He squirmed, bucked, wrenched, and flexed. He was making progress—the cords felt looser than when he had started, but they had not yet relaxed enough for him to free either of his arms.

Pigeon heard conversing women approach the office. He screamed as best he could around the gag.

“Did you hear that?” one of the women said.

Encouraged, he screamed louder.

“Hello?” the voice called.

Pigeon grunted and shouted. "Elm! Elm ee, elm ee!"

The doorknob shook but did not open. It was locked.

"Are you all right?" the woman asked.

"Uh-uh, urry, elm ee!"

"Just a minute, we'll find somebody, hold on!"

Pigeon relaxed. There was no way he could squirm free of the cords before they found somebody to open the door. After a longer wait than he expected, a key rattled in the doorknob, and Ms. Jesky, the vice-principal, entered, followed by a pair of lunch ladies.

"Oh my goodness!" Ms. Jesky gasped, kneeling by Pigeon and tugging at the cords. When his arms were free, Pigeon yanked the gag from his mouth.

"I have to make an emergency call!" Pigeon insisted.

Ms. Jesky was still picking at the cords around his legs as he crawled forward to plug in the telephone.

The Buick screeched to a stop in front of 3488 Winding Way, an attractive, split-level home with a white porch swing out front. There was no vehicle in the driveway.

"Stay put," John said, exiting the car with the crossbow hidden behind his back. He limped briskly up the walkway to the front door and rapped on it with his cane.

Nate's cell phone rang. "Pigeon?"

"Nate, they know about Gary!"

The door to the house swung inward. A column of orange jelly filled the

doorway. John launched a pair of quarrels from his crossbow as the gelatinous pillar sloshed forward, heaving him onto his back. His fedora fell off, and his cane clattered down the porch steps. John fought to his knees, wearing orange ooze from the neck down. Swinging his arms jerkily, he shook off globs of jelly and staggered to his feet. Blood fumed up from his shoulder within the translucent gelatin.

“Too late,” Nate yelled, hanging up the phone. “We need Shock Bits!”

Summer was already shaking some into her palm. “I’m almost out.”

As they dashed from the car, Nate put half of the Shock Bits Pigeon had given him into his mouth. Across the yard, the gelatin slurped upwards, engulfing John’s head. Still flailing, he tumbled down the porch steps. The impact splashed apart some of the jelly, but the majority remained fastened to him. The blobs that had been jostled loose flowed across the ground to rejoin the squirmy central mass.

A tall, hideously deflated man stepped through the doorway, hand pressed to his bleeding shoulder. His lips parted as he launched a small jellyball at Summer, which liquefied when it shorted out her charge with a flash. A second jellyball missed Nate, but the third tagged him with a hiss and a crackle.

From inside the pulsing mass of gelatin, John aimed his dart gun at the man in the door, but it did not fire. John exhaled, stationary bubbles clustering in front of his face.

A baritone voice commenced chanting musically. The Fuse, his radiant birthmark slowly spreading, approached from down the street, arms spread wide, fingers splayed. The front lawn of 3488 Winding Way began to flutter and grow. Blades of grass enlarged into ropy green tentacles, snaking around Nate’s legs, pinioning Summer’s arms to her sides, plunging into the gelatin to entangle John.

Nate thrust an Ironhide into his mouth as the grass writhed higher, twisting and constricting. Saggy skin swaying, the tall man shuffled down the porch steps, crouched, and parted his thick lips. The orange gel abandoned John, leaving him wheezing in the winding grasp of the vines, and flowed toward the tall man.

The Fuse quit chanting and his birthmark stopped glowing, having spread to vividly tattoo more of his face. Grassy vines wound tightly around Nate, Summer, and John from shoulders to ankles. With the Ironhide in his mouth, Nate felt no pain from the squeeze, but he was immobilized. He couldn't even wiggle his fingers.

The tall man swelled as his gaping mouth vacuumed up the orange gel, limp flaps of skin inflating until he was once again big and round. Behind him, Denny and Eric emerged from the house. "That was just sad," Denny laughed.

"Denny, don't do this, help us!" Summer cried.

Denny smirked. "Not my fault I'm playing for the winning team."

"Where's Gary?" John growled.

"Not here," Eric said. "But we know where he's going."

"He has family on the edge of town," Denny said. "Burt and Starla Haag—we'll have him soon."

"Can it," the Fuse spat. "Go fetch the straitjackets."

Denny and Eric ran off obediently, heading down the street.

"Well done, Mauricio," the Fuse said.

The big round man nodded, lips glossy with jelly residue.

"How'd you get out?" John asked.

The Fuse arched an eyebrow. "None of your business."

"I don't get it," John complained. "Your powers are null without your voice."

"Shut up," the Fuse said. "Maybe I pulled a Houdini, what do you care? You should have stuck to the shadows, John. Limping around in broad daylight doesn't suit you. Although, to your credit, you caught up to us much quicker than we expected."

Denny and Eric came running back up the street, each holding a stack of folded straitjackets. The Fuse investigated the jackets, selecting a large one and unfolding it. “John, I expect you’ll make this easy. I can crush your little sidekicks with a word.”

The Fuse mumbled, birthmark shimmering faintly, and the vines around John’s upper body slackened and fell away. The Fuse patted John and discovered a tranquilizer gun tucked away inside of his overcoat, along with a few throwing stars. He passed the weapons to Mauricio. John submissively slipped his arms into the straitjacket, which the Fuse tightened.

“How does your own medicine taste?” Eric taunted.

“No gloating,” the Fuse snapped. He mumbled again and the monstrous grass around John’s legs came free from the ground. “Mauricio, bring the car.”

The big round man strode away. The Fuse walked over to the Buick, opened the door, ducked inside, and came out holding the keys and the crossbow that hurled pellets. “Summer, you put on the next jacket,” the Fuse said. “Again, be nice, or your friends will pay.”

The Fuse chose a jacket, released the grass around Summer’s upper body, and secured her in the white coat. As he had done with John, the Fuse uprooted the grass around her legs, leaving them snugly bound.

Mauricio pulled a black Hummer into the driveway. He got out and lumbered over to the Fuse. “Load John and the girl into the Buick,” the Fuse said. “Then take Eric and Denny back to the shop.”

“What about the boy?” Mauricio asked, jerking a thumb at Nate.

“John Dart has considerable value as a hostage,” the Fuse said. “And keeping one of the brats could prove useful. We don’t need two.”

Mauricio heaved John Dart over one shoulder, dumped him into the Buick, fastened his seatbelt, and then lugged Summer over to the vehicle. Afterwards, the big man plodded over to the Hummer and drove away with Denny and Eric.

The Fuse waved a hand, and the vines binding Nate squeezed tighter and pulled him to the ground. He realized that the Fuse was trying to squeeze the breath out of him, so he pretended to go unconscious. Once he did so, the vines relaxed their grip. The Fuse entered the Buick and started the engine. When the car was out of earshot, Nate started squirming, and the grass binding him began to loosen. Grimly, Nate realized that he represented their last chance. The thought was overwhelming. Part of him wanted to just stay tied up there in the grass. How could he possibly succeed where people as experienced as John Dart had failed?

One hand came free and Nate started tearing at his grass bindings. The odds were against him, but at least he might have the element of surprise on his side.

Sniffing in the backseat of the Buick, Summer squirmed inside of her confining coat. Her nose was running but she could not wipe it. She tried her best to rub her nostrils against her shoulder. John sat stoically beside her, eyes straight ahead, a red stain slowly spreading on the shoulder of his straitjacket.

“Your shoulder,” Summer said.

“Not much of a wound,” John said. “I only grazed him. It was a tough shot.”

Feeling frustrated, Summer twisted and wriggled.

“I’d hold still, Summer,” the Fuse said. “I can still use your bindings to crush either of you at will. Behave, and you might get out of this alive.”

“Every time you use your magic you get closer to dying,” Summer said.

“Making the grass grow big and tie you up took some real power,” the Fuse admitted. “Couldn’t be helped. But manipulating the grass requires almost none.”

“Why’d you have to leave Nate?” Summer said softly.

“Ahhh, missing your boyfriend already?” the Fuse snickered. “Want to know a secret? We already grabbed Gary Haag and his precious key! He was packing up

when we arrived. He's in the Hummer. We told Nate what we needed him to hear. He thinks I tried to crush him, but it was obvious that his body was magically reinforced. I loosened his bindings as we were leaving. Setting him free with that misinformation will get Sebastian Stott out of the way. We can't have the old man meddling, not today. So sit back, relax. This will all be over soon."

Blue



Jogging along Winding Way, Nate went over his plan in his mind. It had not taken him long to determine that soliciting help from Mr. Stott was his best option. Nate had betrayed the old magician by turning to John Dart, but Mr. Stott still didn't want Mrs. White to get the treasure, and he had a vehicle. So, hopefully, after Nate brought him up to speed, all would be forgiven and they could chase down Gary Haag together. Even if it meant Mr. Stott ended up drinking water from the Fountain of Youth, that would be preferable to empowering Mrs. White. Unfortunately, Nate had left the cell phone in the Buick, or he could simply have telephoned.

Nate had considered using a Moon Rock to reach Mr. Stott's house faster, but in broad daylight he felt he would be too conspicuous. Not everyone in town was consuming white fudge. Besides, leaping with a Moon Rock wasn't that much faster than running. Thankfully, most of the way to Mr. Stott's place was downhill.

Sucking on the Ironhide, trotting under the hot sun, Nate was bulletproof, but he was sweaty. He panted and rubbed the stitch in his side, wishing for a stick of Summer's gum.

Eventually Nate diverged from Winding Way into Mr. Stott's neighborhood. He noticed some kids around his age walking home from school, and felt a little jealous. He longed to be equally oblivious to magic candy and magicians and engineered apprentices. Of course, all he had to do was go home and devour a box of white fudge!

Which was not an option. He had to save Trevor. He had to save Summer and John. At least he had to try. Before long somebody would probably have to save him. He wondered if Pigeon needed to be saved.

Nate slowed to a walk for a block, then picked up the pace again. He turned onto Limerick Court, sprinting past the last few houses. His chest was heaving when he reached Mr. Stott's house.

Mr. Stott opened the door before he knocked. "Come in," he said.

"I'm glad you're home," Nate panted, entering. "I was worried you might be off driving your route."

"I stuck around, hoping to hear from you," Mr. Stott said, fingering one of the black stripes in his beard. "I tried to contact you this morning, but the phone was off."

"I lost the phone," Nate said. "I lost a lot of things. We had the *Stargazer*, but Mrs. White recruited bullies from our school who tailed us to the library. We got the ship past them, and I was running it here using Peak Performance gum, but as you know, I saw the fat guy full of jelly waiting near your house in ambush. His name is Mauricio. So I took the ship home, planning to bring it here in the morning, but the wooden Indian from the candy shop came and stole it."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Mr. Stott said, his gaze steady.

"It gets worse. This guy named John Dart was my substitute teacher today."

The name *John Dart* gave Mr. Stott a start. "John Dart? Here in town?"

"He told us you guys are after a drink from the Fountain of Youth and that he had to stop you. He seemed honest, and filled in a lot of blanks, so we decided to help him. He kidnapped Eric, one of the bullies, and found out that the treasure room is under Mt. Diablo Elementary."

"Under the school?" Mr. Stott said. "Two Haags work at your school! One of them, Gary, is from the line that has been here in town since the old days. He was on my short list of suspects."

“Gary was the guy,” Nate confirmed. “Summer and I went to his house with John to pick him up, but Mauricio and the dude with the birthmark beat us there. I barely got away, and they captured John and Summer. They missed nabbing Gary, but they know where he was going. Have you heard of Haags named Burt and Starla?”

Mr. Stott nodded. “They live a ways outside of town. We better get going. Run and say hello to the Flatman, and I’ll meet you in the garage.” He shook his keys and walked toward the door in his kitchen.

Nate hurried down the hall and peeked into the Flatman’s room, feeling unsure what to say to the odd creature. “Hi, Flatman. Mr. Stott is taking me in his truck to chase some guy. I’ll see you soon.”

The Flatman’s fins fluttered.

Nate ran to the garage, joining Mr. Stott in the truck. Mr. Stott hit the gas, leaving the garage door open as they rumbled onto Limerick Court.

“The Flatman told me you were coming and that you would need a ride,” Mr. Stott said. “That’s why I was ready and waiting.”

“I just told him you were taking me in your truck,” Nate said.

“Which is probably what he saw.”

“The birthmark guy is powerful,” Nate warned. “John called him a Fuse. He made the grass turn huge and tangle us up.”

“Nobody wants to contend with a Fuse,” Mr. Stott said. “But Belinda has the map and knows where to find the key. This could be our last opportunity to derail her.”

“I’m with you,” Nate said. “This might be my only chance to save my friends.”

“Burt and Starla live off the beaten path,” Mr. Stott said. “Do you have much candy left?”

“A little,” Nate said. “My second-to-last Ironhide faded to nothing while we

were talking in your house. I have one left. They've been lifesavers."

"I wish I had more candy to offer you," Mr. Stott said. "Our best chance will be to beat Mrs. White's thugs to Burt and Starla's."

"We might make it," Nate said. "I came straight to you. It seemed like the others were taking John and Summer back to the candy shop."

"Let's hope you're right."

They drove out of town on Main Street, and then turned on Gold Coast Drive. The road wove among golden-brown hills and oak-filled valleys. Sprigs of wildflowers blossomed among the brush. Nate was impressed that on some stretches, Mr. Stott got the old truck up to over sixty miles per hour.

About ten minutes into the drive, a dirt road marked Orchard Lane branched off from Gold Coast Drive. "This is our last turn," Mr. Stott said. At first, the dirt road was flat and drivable, but the further they meandered into the hills, the more rutted the road became, and soon they were jouncing along at fifteen miles per hour.

"We getting close?" Nate asked.

Mr. Stott glanced at his odometer. "A few more miles," he said.

Nate repeatedly checked the big side mirrors, watching the empty road behind them, worried that their enemies could overtake them at any moment. The ice cream truck often slowed to less than ten miles per hour.

They were traversing a field where an old wooden bridge spanned a dry creekbed. Tall golden brush thrived everywhere, along with old oaks and a few huge bushes.

Off to one side of the road, a black Hummer pulled out of hiding from behind a screen of shrubs.

"Oh, no," Mr. Stott said.

The Hummer raced toward them, gaining speed as it bounced through the brush. Mr. Stott tried to accelerate, but the road was particularly rutted, and he

almost overturned the top-heavy truck. Rocks scraped against the undercarriage. “What do we do?” Nate asked.

“Ironhide,” Mr. Stott said.

Nate fished out his last Ironhide and put it in his mouth. It became evident that the Hummer meant to broadside them. Mr. Stott swerved off the road and accelerated, trying to avoid the collision, but the Hummer rammed into the side of the Candy Wagon near the rear. The truck spun and flipped upside down. Dreamlike and slow after the initial jolt, the inverted ice cream truck rocked and slammed down on its side.

Nate felt the sensation of rolling and whipping around violently, but his seatbelt held him in place and he experienced no pain. Mr. Stott also had his seatbelt on, but blood trickled down his forehead from where he had bashed the side window. The old magician looked dazed.

The Hummer raced off, spewing up dust on the dirt road. The impact had to have damaged it, but Nate could see only the back of the vehicle as he stared at it sideways through the starred glass of the front windshield. The passenger window was facing the sky. Mr. Stott’s side of the truck was against the ground.

“Drove into a trap,” Mr. Stott mumbled. He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers together, grunting. “There. Changed the gasoline . . . into water. So we won’t explode.”

“Are you okay?” Nate asked.

“Could have used an Ironhide,” he smiled. “Not that it would have reinforced these old bones. I’m unwell.”

“Can I do something?” Nate said.

“If I leave the vehicle, I’ll die,” Mr. Stott said. “My age will catch up with me. Let’s see.” He closed his eyes and pressed his fingers together again. Blood drizzled down into his beard. He bared his teeth, groaning, and suddenly changed into a coyote, a transition that occurred in a blink.

“Mr. Stott?” Nate asked.

“That’s a bit more comfortable,” the coyote said in Mr. Stott’s voice. “I may be able to travel temporarily like this if it becomes life or death. But I can’t change myself back. I’ll require assistance. If I leave the truck in this state, in time my awareness will depart and I’ll grow feral.”

“What do I do?” Nate asked.

“I’d say this qualifies as a dire situation,” the coyote said.

“The Grains of Time?”

“Might as well give it a shot. Now or never.”

“You said blue first, then red, then yellow?”

“In rapid succession,” the coyote said. “Past, future, and present.”

“How long will I have?” Nate asked. “It won’t do much good to go back in time if I’m stuck in a field in the middle of nowhere!”

“You’ll go back a week or two for about an hour, forward a day or two for about an hour, and then you’ll have about an hour with an advantage in the present,” Mr. Stott said. “Your body won’t travel through time. Nobody knows how to send matter across that gulf. But we can send a mind. You will find yourself occupying a vacant mind in the past, and a vacant mind in the future. The minds you occupy will have no idea you were there, no memory of what you did.”

“Will it be somebody nearby?” Nate asked.

“The nearest ideal candidate,” Mr. Stott said. “Colson remains the closest town. You’ll probably end up there. Use your minutes wisely.”

“What should I do?” Nate asked.

“All you can. You’ll find you can’t change the past—at least, I’ve never heard of anyone succeeding. Everything you do ends up being something that already happened. You’ll see.”

“So I can’t do anything?”

“You can do a lot. Just because it already happened doesn’t mean what you accomplished didn’t matter. I’ll confuse you more if I keep talking. Go back and do all you can in the time you have.”

“What about the future?” Nate asked.

“You can change the future, but not while you’re there. None of it has happened yet, you’ll be visiting a possibility. Scour the future for information. The future you will experience is the future without you in it. You see, your mind travels into the future, leaving your body vacant, meaning you weren’t a participant in how things turned out. Once you return to the present, you can try to make things work out differently. Never an easy task.”

“What advantage will I have in the present?” Nate asked.

“Three selves,” the Stott coyote said. “You’ll return to this location, and for an hour or so, you will manifest as three people. All of them will be equally you. Everything will be copied, even your clothes and the items you carry. When time runs out, however far apart your three selves have traveled, you’ll be drawn back together at a central point. You won’t materialize in solid rock or anything, or up in the air, but the spell will reunite you as close as possible to the midpoint of the space separating the three selves.”

“You’re frying my brain,” Nate said. “When time runs out, all my selves will teleport back to a central spot and I’ll be one person again?”

“Yes, but you can’t take anything with you that you didn’t have when you split into three,” Mr. Stott said. “I’ll explain more when the time comes. For now, you better get going.”

“Okay,” Nate said, unscrewing the top of the hourglass.

“You’ll want to spit out your Ironhide,” the coyote cautioned. “Never a good idea to mix candy. Sometimes it’s harmless, but it can be lethal.”

Nate removed the Ironhide from his mouth. “I can’t save it? It’s my last one.”

“Doesn’t work that way. Taking it out undoes the spell. Make this count.”

Nate tossed aside the Ironhide and raised the hourglass. “Down the hatch.” He dumped the blue sand into his mouth. Instantly he felt like the truck was spinning, and he swooned. He experienced a brief sensation of floating, and then soared.

The next thing Nate knew, he was lying in an alley, opening his eyes. It was daytime. He sat up. His clothes were dirty and stank. He had a foul taste in his mouth. Rubbing his jaw, he found it stubbly, a sensation he had never experienced. He was a grown man!

Nate stood up, much taller than he had ever been. He felt unsteady, as if the wooziness from the blue sand were persisting. His head throbbed.

Stumbling out of the alley, Nate found himself next to the bar and grill on Main Street. The sun seemed brighter than usual. He stepped into the eatery.

“What time is it?” Nate called. He sounded like a grown-up!

“Almost three,” a voice called back.

“What day?”

The voice chuckled. “Thursday.”

“I mean what date?”

“September thirteenth.”

Nate stepped out of the bar. Almost three on a school day. He should be walking home down Greenway! That wasn’t far!

Nate rushed along Main, his head hurting, his equilibrium off. He pushed onward, determined to overcome the uncomfortable aftereffects of time travel. He cut down a side street. Looking up ahead, he saw several kids walking along Greenway, including a familiar foursome.

“Summer, Trevor, Pidge, Nate! Hold up! You have to listen to me.”

His friends and his past self looked startled, and started murmuring to each other. Nate continued toward them, trying to ignore the pounding in his head.

“Stay away from Sweet Tooth,” Nate warned, stumbling slightly. “You can’t trust Mrs. White. She’s dangerous. You can’t trust anyone!”

“That’s close enough,” his past self demanded.

Nate halted. Although the scene was becoming eerily familiar, he persisted. “You have to let me explain. Nate, it’s me. I’m you! I’m from the future!”

“Right,” his past self said. “You don’t look anything like me. How do you know my name?”

Mr. Stott had warned him that he would not be able to change the past. He had explained that everything he did would be something that had already happened. Which meant that trying to convince his friends he was a time traveler would be a dead end. He had already failed! With less than an hour to burn, he had to make the most of his time.

“I have no time,” Nate said, plunging his hands into his wild hair. He looked at his past self. “What was I thinking? I forgot that you weren’t going to believe me. I guess you guys don’t want to come with me so I can fill you in on some things?”

“Sorry, we’re not going anywhere with you,” Summer said. It felt strange having her look at him coldly, like a dangerous stranger. It felt strange being so much taller than his friends. It felt strange looking down on himself from the perspective of another person.

“This guy harassing you?” the crossing guard called, approaching from down the street.

“I think he’s drunk,” Pigeon said.

Nate had a clear memory of this moment, thinking what a psycho the stranger must be, thinking how there was no way he would ever look like that slovenly

bum. He remembered that the crossing guard had considered calling the police.

Nate threw up his hands, backing away. “No problem here, sorry to bother you kids.” The stranger had predicted something that would happen. What had he said? Oh, yeah. “Keep in mind, robbing graves isn’t right. I have things to do.”

Nate dashed away down Greenway, in the same direction the homeless stranger had run. What had been the man’s destination? How could he best use his time in the past? He could confront Mrs. White, but her henchmen were there and could certainly handle him, especially if he were alone, unarmed, and without candy. Besides, if he had succeeded doing something to Mrs. White, it would have already happened, right?

He considered his needs in the present. He was stranded in a field miles from town, with no houses around. If he was going to make a difference in the present, he needed a way back into town.

And suddenly it was clear what he needed to do. Of course! It was something he had already done. He just hoped it was something he had succeeded in doing. He would have to hurry.

Nate ran down a side street. He needed to double back, cross Main, and get into his neighborhood. But he couldn’t use Greenway or he would spook the crossing guard and his past self.

He dashed along the nearest street that paralleled Greenway, raced across Main, and entered Summer’s neighborhood. Racing through the middle-class development, he reached the creek. The rainstorm had not happened yet, so it was pretty low. He crossed the stream at a narrow point, managing to hop on rocks and avoid dousing his shoes.

Panting, Nate charged up the slope to the jogging path and trotted to Monroe Circle. He was getting so sweaty and nauseated that he walked up Monroe to his house. Pausing on the sidewalk, he stared at the front door. He knew just where his mom kept the keys, on the hook in the entry hall.

Still he hesitated. He remembered how this had traumatized his mom, and hated the thought of frightening her, but this was an emergency, and he knew the Explorer could handle the terrain where the ice cream truck was stranded. The

SUV was an automatic, his dad had let him drive it short distances a couple of times, and he knew he could successfully steal it on short notice. He needed to do it! In fact, he felt certain that, in a sense, he already had.

Nate walked up to his front door and found it unlocked. Easing the door open, he heard his mom in the kitchen using the sink. He quietly closed the door and took the Explorer keys from the hook. He slunk over to the door to the garage and passed through it silently.

Sliding into the driver's seat, Nate rubbed his eyes. They felt itchy and sore back behind the eyeballs. In the rearview mirror he saw that they were bloodshot. He found it very unsettling to look in a mirror and see somebody else staring back.

He started the engine and clicked the garage-door opener at the same time. He gently pressed on the accelerator as the door went up. The engine revved but the Explorer did not move. He was still in park. He tried to shift to reverse, but the gear stick would not move. He pressed down the brake, and that did the trick. Shifting into reverse, he backed out of the garage, clicking the button to close the door behind him.

Switching into drive, Nate accelerated up Monroe and turned toward Mayflower. It was nice that he could comfortably reach the pedals. In fact, the seat was a little too close to the steering wheel, so he backed it up a few inches.

Now that he was under way, driving felt easier, although he didn't brake soon enough at Mayflower and ended up screeching several yards past the stop sign. He tried to use the turn signal and instead switched on the windshield wipers.

The stop sign at Main was approaching. He considered running it as John Dart had, but chickened out. It proved to be fortunate that he had hesitated, since he would have plowed into the side of a school bus. After a car honked to inform him it was his turn, Nate pulled out onto Main.

Cruising down the street, Nate found it troublesome to maintain a constant speed—he pushed the accelerator either too hard or too softly. Through experimentation he got better. By the time he turned onto Gold Coast Drive, he was feeling confident. He even used his blinker correctly!

The hills looked browner and drier than when he had driven this way with Mr. Stott. He saw no wildflowers. That rain had really freshened up the fields. The speed limit was 55, and he tried not to go over. At this point, getting pulled over for speeding would prove disastrous.

He watched for Orchard Lane, remembering that the road had been small and the sign not particularly obvious. He still felt a little unstable, and his head ached, but he managed to keep the wheel steady. He saw Orchard coming, put on his blinker, and turned.

The dirt road seemed to be in better repair than when he had traveled it with Mr. Stott. It was hard to be sure whether that was truly the case, or if the Explorer just handled the ruts a lot easier than the Candy Wagon had. He had lost all track of time, and began to worry he might skip back to the present at any moment.

Finally he reached the area where the ice cream truck had been ambushed. He saw the oak trees, the bushes, the dry creek with the little bridge. He drove through the dry brush on the opposite side of the road from where the Hummer had been hiding, heading for some voluminous bushes behind a bent oak tree.

Coming around to the back of the bushes, he found he could pull the Explorer into them some distance, screening the vehicle from view on three sides. He got out and locked the doors. The ground was firm and on a slight slope, so he hoped it would be a good place for the deserted Explorer to weather the rains.

Nate stuffed the keys a short ways into the tailpipe and ran off. With his remaining time, he wanted to put some distance between himself and the Explorer, so the man he was inhabiting would not discover the SUV when he regained his senses.

Feeling rested after the drive, he started out at an ambitious sprint, feeling the texture of the dirt road through the thin soles of his shoes. Soon Nate flagged to a brisk walk, throbbing pain hammering inside his forehead. He continued forward in spite of his weariness and discomfort.

Nate was well out of sight of where he had hidden the SUV when the fringes of his vision began to darken. He became so dizzy that he had to sit down. The darkness encroached from all sides until it seemed like he was peering at the

world through a narrow tube.

The world spun and he swooned, soaring up into nothingness.

Chapter Nineteen

Red



Nate came to himself seated in the overturned ice cream truck. “I’m back,” he said to the coyote. “The headache is gone—what a relief!”

“To me it seemed you never left,” the coyote said. “It happened in a twinkling. Hurry, use the red sand.”

Nate unscrewed the other end of the hourglass. “I stashed a car nearby,” Nate reported.

“Good thinking.”

“Hope it’s still there. Off I go!” He poured the sand into his mouth, swooned, and soared.

Nate opened his eyes. He was lying on a couch in front of a television, head cushioned on a decorative pillow. On the TV a judge was dispensing advice to a woman with poofy red hair, who was nodding reluctantly.

Nate sat up. His arms were pudgy and he had long nails. He could feel rolls of fat on his waist and chest. He was a woman!

Hustling to the kitchen, he found a clock. Instead of numbers, it had the hours represented by different species of bird. According to the clock, it was about blue jay past goldfinch. Which meant 3:25. Daylight flooded in through the open

blinds, throwing shadow stripes on the kitchen floor, so he knew it was afternoon.

Nate noticed a set of keys on the counter. He grabbed them and headed for the door, pausing to take a look at himself in the bathroom mirror. His brown hair was tied up in a scarf. The face was chubby and friendly, a woman in her forties wearing too much makeup.

One of the keys was electronic. Scuttling out the door, Nate tapped the unlock button twice. He heard the locks click inside the silver Sentra parked in the driveway. Turning in a circle, Nate recognized the neighborhood—he wasn't far from the cemetery.

Nate tugged open the door of the car and got behind the wheel. Relieved that the car was an automatic, he started it up and backed out of the driveway. Mr. Stott had said the red sand would take him one or two days into the future. Whichever it was, at this time of day, his best bet would be Pigeon's house. Judging from the phone call before the ambush at Gary Haag's, Pigeon was his one friend who had not yet been captured. Hopefully that was still true.

Driving cautiously, Nate found the streets abnormally empty. He wound his way down to Mayflower and followed it to the Presidential Estates. Turning down Monroe, he parked alongside the curb where Pigeon lived.

He got out of the car and walked up to the door, fascinated by the feel of his softer, flabbier body. Nate rang the doorbell, waited, and rang it again. An old man opened the door who looked so much like Pigeon that Nate almost laughed. It had to be his grandfather, or maybe even great-grandfather.

"Can I help you?" the old man asked in a frail voice.

"I'm looking for Pigeon?" Nate said. His own voice surprised him. It was so feminine! He would have to get sprayed for cooties when he got back to normal.

The old man looked him up and down. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, this is really important."

The old man stared at Nate suspiciously. "How do you know him?"

“He’s a really good friend of my son,” Nate tried.

“What friend?”

“Nate Sutter.”

The old man shook his head. “You’re not Nate’s mom. What is this? Who are you really?”

“Who are *you*?” Nate countered. “Pigeon never mentioned he had a grandpa living with him. How do you even know what Nate’s mom looks like?”

“Okay. Try this on for size. I’m Pigeon, and I’ve never met you.”

“Pigeon?” Nate said. “How far into the future did I go?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Pigeon, it’s me, Nate Sutter. Mr. Stott helped me travel into the future and I ended up in this body.”

Pigeon grinned. “No way. Prove it. What’s the name of our club?”

“The Blue Falcons.”

“What does Denny call you?”

“Dirt Face.”

The grin broadened. “Wow, Nate, good to see you.”

“What year is it?” Nate asked, wondering why none of the cars or houses looked futuristic.

“I saw you yesterday,” Pigeon said. “I was aged by magic. Come in.”

Nate entered Pigeon’s house and found a seat on a sofa. Pigeon sat down carefully in an armchair. “What happened with Mrs. White?” Nate asked.

“She did it,” Pigeon said. “She drank from the Fountain of Youth. I tried to stop her but I blew it.”

“Pidge, you have to tell me everything you know. I’m only here for a little while, then I’ll go back to yesterday. We might still be able to stop her.”

“That would be great,” Pigeon said. “Nate, it’s terrible. She’s turned into a little tyrant. Everyone who has been eating the white fudge is under her spell. Like the Sweet Teeth, but worse—they do whatever she says. My parents are actually at a special meeting down at the candy shop right now. She took over the town.”

“How old did she end up?” Nate asked.

“She looks about our age. The age we were, I mean. Ten or eleven.”

“How’d she do it?” Nate asked.

Pigeon settled back into the chair. “Where should I start? Kyle wasn’t at school with Denny and Eric yesterday because he was inside the surgeon doll, the same one you used at the museum. I learned the whole story from him after I was caught. He snuck into our classroom and crawled into your backpack while you were speaking with Mr. Dart. That was why we saw Denny outside the window. Then at the Paradise Inn, Kyle heard we were looking for Haags, so he wanted to get back to Mrs. White with that info. When he heard John was going to drop me at the school, he managed to sneak from your backpack into mine. His goal was to bail out and find Denny, but before he could, I brought him with me into Gary Haag’s office.

“When I talked to Gary, it became clear he was the guy with the key. Gary almost killed me for finding out his secret, but instead tied me up in his office. Kyle was still in my backpack, so he heard everything. Once Gary left, Kyle came out of the backpack and unplugged the phone. That was how I lost you when we were speaking. Then Kyle wriggled under the door and ran off.

“Turns out Kyle went straight to Denny, who called Mrs. White, who blew into Kyle’s eye to break the connection with the doll. Kyle was actually at the candy shop, under her supervision. When he arose from his trance, Kyle told Mrs. White what he had heard, including who Gary was and where Eric and

Wyatt were being held.”

“Is Wyatt the Fuse?” Nate asked.

“Right,” Pigeon said. “And the jelly man is named Mauricio. Mrs. White telephoned Mauricio, who rescued Eric and Wyatt, then picked up Denny. Miss Perlman, Denny’s teacher, used to date Gary, so Denny got his address from her. They had just barely captured Gary and prepared their trap when you guys arrived.”

“So they totally set me up,” Nate groaned. “They knew they didn’t knock me out. They let me get away! They said Gary had escaped to his relatives who lived outside of town. They knew I’d drag Mr. Stott out to the middle of nowhere. The perfect place for an ambush.”

“Pretty much,” Pigeon agreed.

“Then what?” Nate asked.

“Some lunch ladies found me. I plugged in the phone and called as quickly as I could, but I was too late. I knew that the treasure was at the school, and that Mrs. White probably had the key, so I went home for reinforcements. I gave my dog, Diego, some Brain Feed. We’d been having some really good talks, so I knew I could count on him. We returned to Mt. Diablo and spied.

“Mauricio arrived just after I got there. He had Denny, Eric, and Kyle with him. I found out later that they had used the key to blackmail Gary into telling them where the treasure room was hidden. See, the fate of the key is connected to everybody in Gary’s family. For example, if they held the key underwater long enough, everyone in his family would drown, which Mrs. White knew, because Kyle overheard Gary telling me about it. Gary wasn’t sure what would happen if somebody outside his family opened the door. He ended up spilling his guts, since it was his only hope to maybe save his family.

“Mauricio went straight to the cafeteria. Under some filing cabinets in Gary’s office was a hatch that led down to a secret basement. After waiting for a while, I tried to follow them, but Wyatt, the Fuse, captured me and Diego with a couple of giant black widow spiders. Not long after, one of the spiders bit Diego and killed him.” Here Pigeon had to pause, lower lip quivering.

“I’m sorry, Pigeon. I’ll try to save Diego, too.”

Pigeon nodded. He gave a small grin. Nate could tell that the grin was the best response he could muster without crying. He waited for Pigeon to compose himself, and then asked, “Where exactly did you get caught?”

Pigeon drew a shaky breath. “The Fuse was hiding in the cafeteria, back where they prepare the food.”

“How did Wyatt get there?”

“I’m not sure,” Pigeon said. “I didn’t see him arrive with the others. He probably came separately. Might have been before, might have been after.”

“Okay, I’ll do all I can to prevent it from happening.”

Pigeon nodded. “Anyway, Wyatt marched me down the hatch after them. He had used his powers earlier to knock down a wall. Beyond the wall was a tunnel that led to a door. Kyle had unlocked the door. Turning the key had transformed him into an old man. Through the door was a room. The water from the Fountain of Youth was inside a jeweled goblet resting on a pedestal. Mauricio entered the room to retrieve it and dropped dead. He changed into an old skeleton. They had suspected that a curse would fall on whoever turned the key, but had no idea that an aging curse transformed anyone who entered the room. Denny convinced Eric to go in, but he became an old man who couldn’t walk, and collapsed on the floor.

“That was when I showed up with Wyatt. They made me go in after the goblet. That’s how I got so old. I aged as soon as I entered the room, but at least I could still walk. When they sent me into the room, Diego went berserk. His Brain Feed had run out, but he was still trying to protect me. That was when one of the giant spiders bit him.” Pigeon paused, took a shuddering breath, and wiped his nose with his sleeve.

“I’m so sorry,” Nate said. “Remember, we’ll try to prevent any of this from happening.”

Pigeon nodded. “Wyatt worked his magic on the stem of a rose and it coiled

around my neck. I could feel the thorns pricking me. He told me that if I tried to drink the water he would kill me instantly. I knew he could keep his word before I drank it, so I just dumped it out. The problem was, every time you dumped it out, the goblet was full again. The only way to drain it was to drink it. Afterwards it made sense—I mean, if there wasn't some sort of magic to prevent the water from spilling or evaporating, it would have been gone a long time ago.”

“So they ended up with the water,” Nate said.

“Yep,” Pigeon said. “And I almost got strangled for dumping out the goblet, until they saw that it was spill-proof. I helped Eric out of the room, and Wyatt carried him to the car. We all drove back to the candy shop, where they were holding John, Summer, and Gary. We all got to watch Mrs. White turn into a ten-year-old. She was actually pretty cute.”

“Then what?” Nate asked.

“Mrs. White asked John to swear loyalty to her and eat the fudge,” Pigeon said. “He wouldn't, so she had Wyatt kill him. I didn't watch. Then she gave Summer the same offer. Summer accepted. I don't blame her. It was unbelievably scary. After eating the fudge, Summer was like a robot. She did whatever Mrs. White told her.”

“And Gary?”

“Opening the door apparently broke the curse on his family,” Pigeon said. “He was a free man for about twenty minutes, until he ate the fudge.”

“What about you?” Nate asked.

“Mrs. White thanked me for the water and said that I had done enough. She didn't make me eat the fudge. She didn't seem to think I could cause any trouble, since I was so old. And she would have been right, except that you came forward in time and found me. She has become so powerful, I doubt anybody could stop her at this point. I don't think she considered that somebody might be able to go back and stop her before she was invulnerable. But here you are. And here I am.”

“Anything else?” Nate asked.

Pigeon shrugged. “I talked to Kyle afterwards. He was old too, and Mrs. White didn’t make him young, she just dismissed us. Denny was mad she didn’t heal Eric and Kyle, so she made him eat white fudge. Like with me, she didn’t make Kyle eat the fudge. She just sent him away. Kyle was bitter, and we ended up having our first good talk, a couple of eighty-year-old kids. He filled me in on how everything had happened from his point of view, and I explained some of the details he had missed.”

“What about Trevor?” Nate asked.

“Still in the mirrors,” Pigeon said. “He has come to my mirror a few times. I told him the gist of what happened. He keeps hoping you’ll show up back at your place.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Nate asked. “Anything else that might be useful? We get a second shot at this. If it goes right, we can make it all end differently.”

“Would that mean I’d cease to exist?” Pigeon asked pensively. “This me, I mean?”

“Sort of. Not really. Just this last day will cease to exist. Hopefully we can fix it so you’ll never end up old.”

“Then what happens to this me?”

“This you will never happen,” Nate said. “This you isn’t real yet. This you is just a possibility. This is the you without my help.”

“I hope you can do it,” Pigeon said. “I’d love to erase this past day. Do you have any Ironhides left?”

“No, and just one dose of Shock Bits.”

“We’ll think of something,” Pigeon said. “Try to watch out for Diego.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nate said.

“Is it weird being a girl?”

“Not as weird as I would have imagined,” Nate said. “I almost forget if I’m not talking. Is it weird being old?”

“Not too bad,” Pigeon said. “You have to move around more carefully.”

“What time is it?” Nate asked.

Pigeon got up and looked at a clock in the other room. “Just after four.”

“I still may be able to find out more,” Nate said. “Thanks. You can’t think of anything else?”

“You know all I know.”

“See you yesterday.”

“I hope so.”

Nate rushed to the door and got back into the Sentra. Where to next? His mind was whirling with the information Pigeon had shared. John was dead! Summer was a mindless fudge zombie! Mrs. White had become as powerful as everyone had feared. Now that Nate knew how it had happened, he wished he could think of an obvious way to prevent it.

Driving out of the Presidential Estates, he was struck with a thought. Since he now realized how crucial it was, maybe he should visit the Flatman and plant the idea of giving the Grains of Time to his past self. The thought sparked an internal debate. On one hand, he already had the Grains of Time, so what could it matter to plant the idea? On the other hand, here he was with an opportunity to suggest the idea—shouldn’t he do it just to be safe?

Without another more urgent destination in mind, Nate drove to Limerick Court. He got out of his car, rang the doorbell twice, said, “Archmus, I am a friend indeed,” then rang the doorbell again. He heard the locks inside the door clicking.

Pushing open the front door, Nate entered the quiet house. He passed down the hall to the room where the Flatman lived, opened the door, and approached

the basin where the fleshy pancake floated, fins curling languidly.

“Hi, Flatman,” Nate said. “You may not recognize me, but I’m Nate. I’ve been missing ever since Mr. Stott took me to find Gary yesterday. I take it Mr. Stott hasn’t been back.”

The larger eye blinked. One of the slits puckered.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Nate said. He glanced around, saw a small can of fish flakes, and shook several into the bowl as he talked. “Look, if you want to save Mr. Stott, and all of us, you have to tell him to give Nate the Grains of Time. Nate. I’m actually a fifth grader. And a boy. Anyhow, the Grains of Time are how I’m here now. Things are a mess. We were ambushed. If Mr. Stott hadn’t given me the sand, we’d already be sunk. I had the Grains of Time because you told him. So be sure to tell him. In the past. Got it?”

The eye blinked.

“Great. In this future, Mrs. White ended up drinking from the Fountain of Youth. Do you have any advice on how to stop her?”

The eye blinked twice.

“Thought I’d ask,” Nate said. “I’d better be going. I’ll be traveling back to the present to fix things soon. You sit tight.”

On his way out, Nate saw that it was 4:15. He trotted out to the Sentra. With only a few minutes left, he decided to check out the candy shop, see if that meeting was still in progress.

He drove down Greenway, but had to pull over and park before he reached Main. The intersection was thronged with fudge fanatics. Male and female, black and white, young, old, and middle-aged.

Nate got out of the car and joined the crowd. They were all pressing toward the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe, trying to get nearer. Messages came percolating through the multitude, repeated from person to person.

“Linda said Tammy Speckler will be in charge of everyone who lives in

Redwood Homes.”

“Linda said the next wave of fudge will be parceled out on Saturday!”

“Linda said if we work together we can accomplish anything.”

After hanging around at the edge of the mob for a few minutes, Nate gathered that they were gearing up to widen the distribution of white fudge to neighboring communities, with team leaders and awards for those who dispensed the most. The crowd seemed zealous to hear and obey Linda’s commands.

“I have an important message for Linda!” Nate cried in a strident voice.

His words flowed forward through the crowd. People craned to get a look at him as his words were repeated all the way to the front. The crowd parted around him, allowing him to walk into the store. He started to feel a little woozy, the same sensation that had preceded his departure from the past.

A young girl stood on the counter wearing a red dress and a ruffled white apron. A pink satin patch covered one eye. She wore white ribbons in her auburn hair, and had a light spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Pigeon was right—even with the patch, she was pretty cute.

“I hear you bring a message,” she said imperiously as Nate walked down the impromptu aisle.

Nate felt dizzy. He wanted to sit down. Instead, he glared at the little girl standing on the counter. “Belinda, enjoy this now, because none of it is ever going to happen.”

The girl frowned. “I’m Linda,” she said. “Who are you?”

“Somebody willing to do anything to prevent all of this.” Nate blinked several times. Blackness was creeping in from all directions.

“Too late,” the girl said, smirking. “Care for some fudge?”

“See you yesterday,” Nate said, looking at her through a tunnel.

The little girl’s eyes narrowed, and then widened. “You!” he heard her say as

he fell backwards into darkness. He began to soar, and then slowed, feeling compressed, like he was folding in on himself. He had not experienced this uncomfortable sensation previously. Without form, Nate struggled. With a final burst of exertion that he could not explain, he was soaring again, leaving everything behind, dwindling into nothing.

Yellow



“I should have warned you,” said the coyote embodiment of Mr. Stott. “You went to see Belinda, didn’t you?”

Nate nodded, back in the Candy Wagon, feeling unexpectedly weary. He wiped drool from his lips. “She won,” he mumbled. “She was young. She had control over everybody who had eaten the fudge.”

“You almost didn’t make it back,” the coyote said. “Belinda must not have realized who you were until the last moment; otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Having regained her youth, she had become the most powerful magician in history. Puissant enough to override any enchantment of mine. I should have forewarned you to avoid her. I did what I could to pull from this end. You were thrashing around and foaming at the mouth.”

“Can she still get to us?” Nate asked.

“You were visiting a possibility,” the coyote said. “Now that you’re back, the possibility does not yet exist. You should be safe for the moment. Just make sure you stop her.”

“Now I have to eat the yellow,” Nate said.

“Right. Did you learn what you needed?”

“I don’t know. I hope so. I know how Mrs. White succeeded. I’m still working out the details of how to prevent everything from happening the same. I’m not

sure if this is something I can do, Mr. Stott.”

“You have to try,” the coyote said. “You’ve come this far, Nate. At least you have a chance of stopping her. You’ve already done better than most people would have. Try to stay calm. During the drive back into town you’ll have to try to piece everything together and come up with a plan.”

“We’ll see,” Nate said, shaking his head. “The magic guarding the water from the Fountain of Youth makes people age. Pigeon looked like he was in his eighties. If that happens again, could he be cured?”

“Aging due to a spell is different from natural aging,” the coyote said. “It would be beyond my capabilities, but I know that some types of aging magic can be reversed.”

“I’ll try to keep it from happening in the first place,” Nate said.

“You need to eat the yellow sand promptly, but let me explain a thing or two first,” the coyote said. “This magic does not produce clones. It will divide you into three linked manifestations of the same individual. If one gets hurt, they all suffer the same injury, because they are the same person. If one uses magic candy, they will all exhibit the effects. If one self uses a certain candy while another self ingests a different treat, you risk the side effects of mixing magic.”

“Will my candy be linked also?” Nate asked.

“Yes, the same way you are,” the coyote said. “Everything the yellow sand splits into three is connected. You will not triple your candy supply. If one of your selves eats a particular candy, the corresponding candy will vanish from the other two selves as it is chewed and digested. If you use up the magic of a candy and spit it out, the other two corresponding candies will become useless.”

“And you said before that I can’t keep anything I find, because only linked items will teleport with me when my selves reunite,” Nate said.

“I think you’ve got the idea,” the coyote said. “Hurry and finish the sand. You may want to go outside—it will get cramped in here with two more of you.”

Nate held up the hourglass, examining the sphere of yellow sand trapped in

the central chamber. “Do I break the glass to get it out?”

“We merged the yellow sand into a solid lump to keep the rest of the sand separate. You’ll find that the glass is edible—just chew it all up and swallow. Nate, this is a tough assignment. Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Nate said. “I’ll do my best.”

With the Candy Wagon on its side, the passenger door was facing the sky. Hanging the hourglass chain back around his neck, Nate unclipped his seatbelt, stood on the side of his seat, and pushed the door open. He boosted himself up onto the side of the truck, surprised by how far away the brushy ground looked.

Nate crouched and dropped into the brush, rolling when he struck the dirt to help break the fall. The glass portion of the hourglass did not feel edible, but, trusting Mr. Stott, Nate put it in his mouth and chewed it up. The glass was sugary, like fragile rock candy. The sourness of the yellow sand made his mouth pucker.

As Nate swallowed, he realized that he was staring at two other exact replicas of himself who were also swallowing. In unison, the three Nates raised a hand, waved, and said, “Hi.”

They laughed at the simultaneous action, and then all together said, “It’s going to be fun working with such studly guys.”

Again the three Nates laughed. “Seriously,” they said. “We better get going.”

The three Nates all ran toward the bushes where they had hidden the Explorer. “I hope it’s still there,” they all said.

“We need to stop speaking all at once,” they complained, chuckling at how they couldn’t get out of sync. “Great minds think alike,” they muttered.

Racing around to the back of the bushes, they found the Explorer parked where they had left it. The tires had sunk into the ground a little, but otherwise the vehicle looked fine. They crouched together. The nearest Nate poked a finger into the tailpipe and retrieved the keys.

“We need to figure out a way to tell ourselves apart,” they all said. “How about the Nate holding the keys is number one? Okay, sounds good.”

“You’ll be Two,” One said, pointing. “And you’ll be Three. Remember, we’re all the same guy. We need to trust that about each other as we split up.” Nate thumbed the unlock button twice. “I’ll drive.”

“Shotgun,” the other two Nates called simultaneously.

“Two, you take shotgun,” One said.

They loaded into the SUV, and One started the engine. “The pedals are a lot harder to reach,” One said, adjusting the seat as much as possible.

“Need me to work the pedals?” Two asked.

“I think I can manage,” One said, backing out from the bushes, stretching to both reach the pedals and see over the steering wheel. “We’re not tall, but we’re not tiny.”

“Do we all have the same plan in mind?” Three asked.

“What are you thinking?” One and Two inquired.

“We’ll probably want to split up to make the most of our advantage,” Three said. “One of us should go to the school to meet up with Pigeon and try to make that turn out better, hopefully ending up with the goblet.” One and Two nodded.

“Another of us should go to the candy shop,” Three continued. “We know that Mauricio and Wyatt will both be gone, along with Denny, Eric, and Kyle. While they’re away, we might have a chance to free Summer and John, which could create a second chance to intercept the goblet if the Nate at the school fails.”

“Still with you,” the other Nates said.

“And, as I know we’ve been thinking, the last of us should go home and use a Mirror Mint to try to save Trevor.”

“It’ll be risky,” One said, guiding the SUV along the dirt road. The road was significantly more rutted than when he had driven the Explorer along it earlier.

The rains must have caused the erosion.

“We have two mints,” Two said. “We use one to get into the mirror, and give Trevor the other to get out.”

“And we hope that by having two of us outside the mirror, the one inside will teleport out when we reunite at a central point,” Three concluded.

“We have to try,” they all said.

“Who goes where?” Three asked.

“Let’s go by number, in the order you laid out the plan,” One said. “I’ll go to the school, Two will lurk around the Candy Shoppe, and Three will go into the mirror.”

“Not that the mirror is the riskiest part,” Three grumbled.

“They’re all risky,” Two said. “If any of us get hurt, we all get hurt.”

“What if being in the mirror keeps me from getting drawn back to you guys when we’re supposed to reunite?” Three said. “I could exist as a Nate duplicate trapped in the mirror forever. I’m just as much Nate as you guys!”

“I bet we’ll either all get sucked into the mirror, or you’ll get sucked out,” One speculated.

“Easy to say when you’re not the guy in the mirror,” Three muttered. “One of us has to take the risk—I’ll do it. But if I end up stuck in there, you guys better never rest until you get me out.”

“We won’t,” One and Two promised.

“I know you won’t,” Three sighed. “I wouldn’t.”

“We should drop off One first,” Two said. “He most needs to be early. Then drop me off near the store, then Three can take the car home.”

“Sounds like a plan,” One said. “I’ll drive to the back of the school. I don’t want to risk being spotted by entering from the front.”

“Let’s spend some time thinking separately about our own missions,” Two said.

“Good idea,” One and Three agreed.

The truck bounced along the rutted road for a while in silence.

“Are we getting close to the paved road?” Three asked.

“Not far,” One said.

They continued for some time without speaking.

“I thought up a joke,” Three announced. “Want to hear it?”

“You’re supposed to be planning for your mission,” Two said.

“My mission is easy,” Three said. “Go into the mirror, give Trevor the candy, and wait.”

“There’s Gold Coast Drive,” One said as the street came into view.

“What has three heads, six arms, and half a brain?” Three asked.

One and Two answered in unison. “Nate Sutter.”

“I’ve never actually bitten anyone,” Diego said. “I mean, I’ve fantasized about it, but now that I might have to actually do it, the thought makes me a little squeamish.”

“You’ll do great,” Pigeon said, patting his Labrador reassuringly as they hurried up the ramp at the rear of Mt. Diablo Elementary.

“Most of my food isn’t much more than meaty porridge,” the dog said. “I’m not complaining, it tastes good, but it doesn’t really test my teeth. Do you think I could break skin?”

“For sure,” Pigeon said. “You just need more confidence. Don’t you think I’m worried too? How am I supposed to succeed where everybody else failed? But we have to give it a shot. The bad guys will probably show up here soon to claim their treasure. We have the element of surprise on our side. If we’re stealthy, we might find a way to stop them.”

“I can do stealthy,” Diego assured him. “You wouldn’t believe how many birds I’ve almost caught.”

Pigeon knelt just before they reached the top of the ramp. He held out some Brain Feed in his palm. “You better have a little more,” Pigeon said. “I don’t want you to relapse.”

Diego ate the kibbles. “You say I get all slobbery and stop responding to your commands?”

“Pretty much,” Pigeon said. “Without the Brain Feed, your only tricks are *sit* and *shake*. And I have to help you shake by grabbing your paw.”

“Funny, I can’t picture that. If you say so.”

“Don’t let me forget to give you more in a few minutes,” Pigeon said.

They arrived at the top of the ramp to find Nate racing toward them. Nate stopped running and waved his arms.

Pigeon rushed over to greet Nate. “Am I glad to see you!” Pigeon gushed.

“Me too,” Nate said. “I was starting to worry I’d missed you. I’ve been searching all over.”

“Where are Summer and John?” Pigeon asked.

“They were captured,” Nate said. “Only I got away. I have a lot to explain. Where were you going to wait for the bad guys?”

“We were planning to set up a stakeout over by the Dumpster,” Diego said, making Nate jump.

“Forgot about the talking dog,” Nate said. “Okay, you two didn’t get caught

there last time, so that sounds good.” They started walking across a playing field toward the front of the school.

“Last time?” Pigeon asked.

“I used the Grains of Time that Mr. Stott gave me,” Nate explained. “I’ve been to the past and the future. Remember that bum who bugged us when we were walking home that time? It really was me. My mind traveled back into his body.”

“No way,” Pigeon said.

“What bum?” Diego asked.

“Long story,” Nate said. “I also went to the future where Belinda had succeeded in drinking from the Fountain of Youth. Pigeon, in that future, you and Diego tried to stop her unaided. Diego got killed, and you were changed into an old man.”

“You weren’t here?” Pigeon said.

“The future I saw was the future without me in it. But I’m here this time, and I know what went wrong. Hopefully we can do things differently and make everything turn out better.”

“How’d I get killed?” Diego asked.

“Mauricio showed up with Denny, Eric, and Kyle. They went to the janitor’s office and used a hidden entrance to get into a secret basement. When you guys tried to follow, Wyatt ambushed you with giant black widow spiders. He captured Pigeon and later killed you, Diego.”

“Wyatt?” Pigeon asked.

“Wyatt is the Fuse, Mauricio is the jelly guy,” Nate said.

“What should we do differently?” Pigeon asked.

“First let’s run to the Dumpster,” Nate said, picking up the pace.

Pigeon ran along behind, slowly falling back. As they raced through the

school, he noticed that there were still teachers in some of the classrooms. It was strange to think that for most people, this was just another ordinary day. When they reached the parking lot, several cars remained. Nate, Diego, and Pigeon all ducked into the chain-link cage that surrounded the Dumpster.

“Does this feel good?” Nate asked. “Is this where you would have stayed to spy on their arrival?”

“I think so,” Pigeon said.

“Once they arrive, we partly just need to lay low longer,” Nate said. “Instead of following them, we should set up an ambush. Turning the key to open the treasure room door will age Kyle. Entering the room will kill Mauricio. Then Eric will enter the room and end up an invalid. That was when they sent you, Pigeon, into the room to retrieve the goblet with the water from the Fountain of Youth. That was how you turned old. If we stay out of the way, Denny will have to retrieve it, and he’ll end up old also.”

“Then what?” Pigeon asked.

“If Denny fails, we’ll be ahead of the game. The others are too old to retrieve the goblet; entering the room would kill them like it killed Mauricio. If Denny succeeds, we’ll have to jump him and Wyatt and take back the goblet. Denny will be old and frail. We’ll have to shock Wyatt or something. Do you have any Shock Bits left?”

“One dose,” Pigeon said. “Do you have any?”

“I have one also. Remember, with Wyatt, we have to zap him quickly, or he’ll use his magic on us. Once we have the goblet, we can’t just pour out the water. A protective spell keeps the goblet full until somebody actually drinks it. I was hoping Diego might volunteer to down the water. Wouldn’t you like to be a puppy again?”

“I’m only what, six years old?” Diego said. “What if I get so young I cease to exist?”

“That could happen if any of us drink it,” Nate said. “But in dog years you’re like forty-two, making you the oldest by far.”

“What if the water doesn’t take dog years into account?” Diego asked. “Then I’d be the youngest.”

“We have to get rid of this water,” Nate said. “After Mrs. White turns young, everyone who has tasted the white fudge will fall under her control. And she’ll start preparing to distribute white fudge to the world.”

“How come the dog is more disposable than the human?” Diego complained.

“There has to be another way,” Pigeon said.

They stood in awkward silence for a moment.

“I’m kidding, Pidge,” Diego said reluctantly. “I know how much this matters to you. I’d do anything you asked of me, you know that. You want me to lap up the water?”

Pigeon dug more Brain Feed out of his pocket and fed it to Diego. He stroked the dog’s black fur. “Yeah, we need you to do this. Hopefully it will work out for the best.”

“Right,” Diego said, trying to sound brave. “It’ll be fun to be a puppy again.”

A black Hummer with one side of the front bashed in came zooming along Oak Grove Avenue and squealed into the parking lot. Nate crouched out of sight behind the Dumpster as Pigeon peeked out through the fence.

“It’s them,” Pigeon whispered. “Mauricio, Denny, Eric, and Kyle. Where’s the Fuse?”

“He didn’t arrive with them,” Nate replied quietly.

“They’re heading into the school,” Pigeon reported. “Going toward the cafeteria, just like you said.”

“We need to be patient,” Nate said. “They have to get into the janitor’s office, move some filing cabinets to find the hatch, climb down, get to the door, open it, and have a few of them get old.”

“Where do you want to ambush them?” Pigeon asked after a minute.

“Are they out of sight yet?” Nate asked.

“Yes.”

Nate came out from behind the Dumpster and surveyed the area. “We should hide behind the Hummer. That way Wyatt will come close enough for us to shock him. We’ll have to strike quickly.”

“I wish you had another Ironhide,” Pigeon said.

“Sorry,” Nate said.

“I can hide under the Hummer,” Diego offered. “I’ll rush out and distract him, go for his legs, then you guys can move in and deliver the shock.”

“Sounds good,” Nate said.

“What’s the difference between waiting over here and waiting behind the Hummer?” Pigeon asked.

“Nothing, I guess,” Nate said. “Except if we hide at the Hummer, we’ll already be in position, just in case.”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Pigeon agreed.

Staying low, they dashed across the parking lot and squatted behind the Hummer. Diego crawled underneath and then crawled back out. “I’ll go back under when the time comes,” Diego said.

Pigeon gave Diego a few more kibbles of Brain Food.

“There are two other versions of me running around town,” Nate said.

“What?” Pigeon asked.

“The yellow sand of the Grains of Time split me into three,” Nate explained. “The other two dropped me off at the back of the school a few minutes before I found you. One of me is staking out the candy shop to help Summer and John,

and the other is going to try to help Trevor. In a little while we'll all get drawn back together at a central location."

"Are you the real Nate?" Pigeon asked.

"We're all the real Nate," Nate said. "It's complicated."

They waited in silence. After some time, Pigeon gave Diego more Brain Feed.

"How's life as a dog?" Nate asked.

"No complaints," Diego said. "Nice home, good family, plenty to eat, attention when I want it, time to myself when I want it. I've always wondered though, Pigeon, why'd you give me a Spanish name?"

"Dad got you in San Diego," Pigeon said.

"Ah," Diego said. "I missed that somehow. Makes sense."

Chanting commenced behind them. They turned in time to see the Fuse approaching, arms spread wide, birthmark blazing. In front of him on the asphalt, three black widow spiders expanded to horrific proportions, each reaching the size of a small car, most of the mass residing in their bulbous abdomens.

While Nate tucked his candy into his pants, and Pigeon fumbled for his Shock Bits, the glossy spiders pounced, adroitly binding them in sticky threads. Diego barked. Once the kids were bound, the gargantuan spiders backed off.

"On your feet," Wyatt said. "I have total control of these adult female black widow spiders. At this size, I don't think I need to explain what their venom would do to you."

Nate and Pigeon shared a terrified glance. This was not supposed to happen.

Nate number three entered his bathroom and found Trevor waiting in the mirror. Trevor looked relieved to see him and waved. Nate waved back and

popped in a Mirror Mint.

Nate had considered bringing a pile of comic books into the mirror with him, in case he ended up stranded. Then he had remembered that he would not be able to see anything in the darkness. If he was going to read anything, somebody would have to hold it up to the mirror from the outside.

Climbing onto the counter, Nate tested the mirror. It felt pliable, flexing inward as he pressed his hand against it. Biting down hard on the mint, Nate crossed through into the cold darkness.

“What are you doing?” Trevor asked excitedly. “Did you find extra mints?”

“I still only had two,” Nate said. “I want you to use the last one.”

“But then you’ll be trapped!”

Nate explained about being split into three selves, and his theory that when the selves reunited, he would be pulled out of the mirror realm.

“Sounds risky,” Trevor said.

“At least it gives both of us a chance,” Nate said. “Otherwise you’d be hopeless.”

“What should I do when I get out?” Trevor asked.

“Do you have any candy left?” Nate asked.

“They took it all,” Trevor said.

“Maybe you can go give me a hand at the school or the candy shop.” Nate hastily outlined what had happened to the others and what was going on.

“Sounds like you might need more help at the school,” Trevor said.

“You better hurry,” Nate encouraged, finding Trevor’s hand in the darkness and giving him the mint.

“If you end up trapped, I’ll get you out,” Trevor promised.

“Okay,” Nate said. “I’ll be waiting here.”

Trevor bit down on the final Mirror Mint and crawled through the mirror onto Nate’s bathroom counter. Dropping to the floor, he clutched his side. Wincing into the mirror at Nate, he waved and exited the bathroom.

Pigeon glanced over his shoulder at the eight eyes of the massive spider following him, his view of the black widow blurred by tears. The sleek, silent arachnid followed him dispassionately, legs working in creepy coordination. Webbing bound his arms to his sides.

Pigeon hung his head. Not much had changed from the way Nate had described things going the first time. The only difference was that instead of just Pigeon and Diego getting captured, now there were three prisoners.

Diego padded along beside him. Was his dog going to die again? Pigeon wished he had never given the Labrador Brain Feed. He wished he had not come to know his dog on such a personal level. He wished Diego was still slobbering out in the backyard.

“How did you find us?” Nate asked as Wyatt marched them into the custodial office.

“What’s it to you?” Wyatt asked.

“Weren’t you in the cafeteria?” Nate asked.

The Fuse huffed. “Part of the time. A good sentry stays in motion. I spotted you running over to the Hummer, and moved into position while you were jabbering.”

Two of the three spiders descended through the dark square on the floor of the custodial office, lowering themselves with silky strands of webbing, one of them carrying Diego. Wyatt uttered a few musical words, and the webs binding Nate and Pigeon fell away. The boys descended a rope ladder through the opening. The ladder was longer than Pigeon expected, and it twisted as he climbed down.

Wyatt clicked on a large flashlight. Pigeon reached the dirt floor and moved out of Nate's way. Powdery dust plumed up with each step, making the flashlight beam look almost tangible. The two enormous black widows waited silently as the third lowered herself into the darkness.

Wyatt descended last, the flashlight hanging from a belt loop. When he landed on the ground, he summoned two of the spiders with a gesture. Their spinnerets quivered, and soon Pigeon and Nate had their arms bound to their sides again by sticky webs. The Fuse jerked a thumb to indicate which way they should proceed.

The ancient walls of the basement were fashioned out of stone. On the far side of the room, part of the wall had collapsed to reveal a tunnel sloping away into darkness. Pigeon led the way with Diego, followed by Nate, followed by the spiders, followed by the Fuse. The air smelled so richly of dirt and stone that Pigeon could almost taste it.

"No heroics, Diego," Nate murmured. "We know how it ends if you try anything."

"I hear you," Diego said.

"Stop gabbing," Wyatt demanded from behind them.

The air grew more chilly the deeper they descended. Denny called from up ahead, "Who is that?"

"Wyatt," the Fuse responded. "I caught Nate and Pigeon."

"We can see the magic water," Denny said. "Mauricio died when he entered the room. He turned into a pile of bones. Eric went in and became an old man. He can't walk. Kyle's already old from opening the door—I think the room would age him into bones like Mauricio. Mrs. White warned that strange things might happen to us, but promised she could fix whatever happened once she had the magic water. That's the truth, right?"

"Right," Wyatt said.

Pigeon rounded a bend in the tunnel and Denny came into view, holding a

small flashlight. An elderly version of Eric lay beyond a stone doorway beside a rotted pile of human bones. Kyle leaned against the wall, breathing erratically. He looked too old to be standing.

“We’ll send in one of these two next,” Wyatt said. “You’ve done well so far, Denny.”

“I’ll go,” Nate said.

Pigeon wanted to make a similar offer, but the words were stuck in his mouth. He wrung his hands. “I can do it,” he managed in a small voice.

Nate shot Pigeon an insistent look. The look conveyed a desperate need to be the one who went into the room, something more than heroism. Pigeon realized Nate might have a plan. “I’m more responsible for starting this whole mess,” Nate said. “I want to finish it, not Pigeon. Besides, the dog might not react well if Pigeon goes in there.”

“If you’re volunteering, you’re more than welcome,” Wyatt said. “Just don’t try to get smart.” The Fuse held a rose up to Nate’s neck and mumbled a chant. His birthmark brightened and spread more, covering almost all of his face. The stem of the rose elongated and snaked around Nate’s neck, sharp thorns needling his skin. “If you attempt to drink the water, I’ll finish you before it touches your lips.” The Fuse intoned more soft words, and the webbing binding Nate’s arms to his torso dissolved. “Do this right, and maybe Mrs. White will show mercy after she regains her youth.”

“I won’t be holding my breath,” Nate said.

Pigeon peered through the doorway. The room was bare save for a black stone pedestal on the far side. Atop the pedestal rested an ornate golden goblet set with glittering gemstones. There was nowhere to hide. Pigeon could not foresee what Nate might have in mind.

“See you, Pidge,” Nate said, giving his friend’s shoulder a squeeze. Nate kicked off his shoes. Scowling, Nate rubbed his eyebrows. Pigeon thought they suddenly looked singed. Nate touched his elbow, getting blood on his fingertips.

“Get a move on,” Wyatt demanded.

Nate paused a moment longer, as if bracing himself, then strode forward. The instant Nate stepped into the room, he started growing taller and withering. Loose clothes became much too tight, the sleeves and pant legs much too short. Liver spots appeared on his wrinkled hands. His hair thinned and became a silvery white. He hunched forward, walking with a stoop. At least he could still walk.

Nate looked back, the thorny collar snug around his wrinkled neck. Pigeon could hardly recognize his friend. His face was longer, his nose bigger and droopier, his eyebrows bushier. Limp folds dangled below his chin, and deep creases marred his face. But the eyes were Nate's, and the smile.

"I always hoped to grow old gracefully," Nate chuckled, his voice deeper and more fragile.

"Get the water," Wyatt demanded.

Diego whined. Pigeon crouched beside the dog.

Nate shuffled toward the pedestal, taking small, cautious steps. Upon arriving at the pedestal, he hovered over the goblet for a moment, as if staring into it.

"Hurry up," Wyatt ordered.

Nate picked up the goblet and turned around, shuffling back over to them. Pigeon kept waiting for the trick. As he neared the doorway, Nate put a hand to his head and swayed. Steadying himself, he stepped through the doorway and handed the goblet to Denny.

"Well done, let's get out of here," Wyatt said.

Pigeon stared at Nate, watching for a sign, straining to guess what Nate expected from him.

"I'm not feeling so well," Nate said, massaging his temples.

"Pull Eric out here," Wyatt commanded.

Nodding, Nate crouched, grabbed Eric's shriveled legs, and dragged him out

of the treasure room. Then Nate sat down and buried his face in his hands.

“Get up!” Wyatt barked.

Nate turned translucent, became blurry, and vanished. The thorny stem fell to the ground. Diego barked.

“What happened?” Denny asked.

“Must have been a curse,” Pigeon said.

Denny looked uncertainly at the jeweled goblet.

“Doesn’t matter,” Wyatt said, crouching to pick up Eric. “We need to get back.”

Pigeon glanced at the goblet. It was so close! Nate had warned that spilling it would do no good. Maybe Nate had thought of a trick to pull now that his selves had reunited. Or maybe he had no plan, and was simply being heroic.

The Fuse raised his hands palms outward and chanted briefly. The three black widows shrank down to their original tiny statures. Wyatt stomped on them.

“Don’t get any ideas, Pigeon boy,” Wyatt said. “This is over. Don’t make me do unnecessary violence to you or your mutt. Come on.”

Pigeon followed him away from the treasure room.

Nate number two stood at a window inside the antique store across from the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. He kept waiting to see Mauricio or Wyatt leave along with Denny, Eric, and Kyle, but a lot of time had passed, and he began to fret that he had missed their departure.

A *Closed* sign hung in the candy shop window. Nate had watched a steady stream of people approach the shop, jiggle the door, peer through the glass, and turn away in disappointment.

Before taking up his position inside the antique store, Nate had confirmed that the back door of the antique store was locked. He had circled the candy shop, furtively searching for an unlocked window and finding none. He knew that spells protected the candy shop from unauthorized intruders, so he had saved a direct assault as a last resort.

A husky bald man with a goatee shook the candy shop door. The man checked his watch and banged on the glass. Shaking his head disgustedly, the man stalked away.

Nate had been spying on the candy shop for almost thirty minutes. His hour had to be waning. If he was going to risk a direct assault on the shop, he knew it was now or never.

Since he had no money on him, Nate picked up a heavy bronze candlestick without paying and walked out. He jaywalked across Main and flung the candlestick through one of the large plate-glass windows. Huge sheets of glass fell, dissolving into shards and splinters as they hit the ground.

An enormous sound followed, like the blast of a ship's horn, accompanied by a searing flash of light and heat. Nate fell over backwards, landing in the street and scraping his right elbow. Picking himself up, he approached the window. He used the sole of his shoe to try to push away some of the remaining glass. When his foot touched the glass, a tremendous shock sent him spinning to the ground. Nate lay on the sidewalk in a stupor, fingers twitching. He had underestimated the defenses of the shop.

After a few deep breaths, Nate sat up. Despite the violent jolt, no lasting harm appeared to have occurred. As he began to rise, Nate started to grow and age. His shoes squeezed his feet, and Nate tore them off with liver-spotted hands. Rising painfully, he hobbled away from the broken window.

Why was he old? This was not part of the plan! Had everything fallen apart?

He leaned against a light pole to catch his breath. Cars roared by on Main, indifferent to his internal anguish. Time was running out, and he could think of nothing useful to do.

Out of breath and sweaty, his ribs screaming in pain, Trevor found the door to the school cafeteria unlocked. It was almost strange to feel his heart beating again. In the mirror realm, he had been able to run all he wanted without getting tired. In all his time there, Trevor had not felt his heart beat once, even when he had jogged a long distance with his fingers pressed to his neck as an experiment.

He dashed inside the cafeteria to the custodial office and found that door unlocked as well. Inside he discovered a square hole in the floor and a rope ladder. Hurriedly Trevor pulled up the rope ladder and tipped over a filing cabinet to cover the hole.

Trevor exited the cafeteria and checked the parking lot. He arrived just in time to witness the black Hummer driving away. He slumped down and a black Labrador approached him, nudging him with a wet, black nose.

“Diego?” Trevor asked, recognizing the purple collar. “What are you doing here?”

The dog had no response.

The Goblet



Nate materialized on a side street not far from Main. Fortunately there were no cars speeding down the road the moment he appeared. His shoes sat nearby. Groaning, Nate picked up his shoes and shuffled over to the edge of the street.

He had three sets of memories colliding in his mind. Memories of giant black widow spiders spinning webs around him and of aging as he entered the treasure room. Memories of breaking one of the candy shop windows. Memories of waiting behind the mirror, staring out at his empty bathroom, hoping he would not be trapped in the frigid blackness forever.

It took a few moments to reconcile the different recollections. The incident with the candlestick and the candy store window explained how his eyebrows had gotten singed and where the scrape on his elbow had come from. Two of his selves had not felt the shock when he had kicked the glass—apparently only the actual changes to his body were universally experienced, not sensations. He remembered his panic in the mirror realm as his body began to age.

After sorting through the various memories, Nate began to feel whole again. He still had some candy, though he doubted it would work now that he was old. He tried to get a Moon Rock out of his pocket to experiment, but his pants were so tight, and his fingers so arthritic, that he failed.

All Nate knew was that he wanted to get to the candy shop to see how everything ended. He shambled along the side street until he reached Main, then

turned in the direction of the candy shop. He waited at a crosswalk until the traffic ebbed. Many cars lined up waiting as he slowly traversed the intersection. He was hurrying as best he could, but his old legs grew tired so quickly!

After having paused several times to rest on a bench or squat on some stairs, Nate arrived at the candy shop. The window remained broken. The closed sign was still on display.

Through the broken window Nate could hear voices in the back. “Hey!” Nate called. “Hey! It’s Nate! Let me in!”

A moment later Mrs. White pushed through the batwing doors, wearing a black eye patch. “Nate, how good of you to join us!” she said. She unlocked the front doors and opened them, admitting him. “I didn’t expect to see you again. You arrived just in time for the grand finale! I understand I have you to thank for claiming my prize.”

“You could say that,” Nate agreed in a meek voice.

Mrs. White closed the door, locked it, and offered Nate her arm. He let her escort him into the back. Summer, John, and Gary were tied up sitting on the floor. Pigeon was there too, webs still binding his arms to his sides. They gazed at Nate in despair. Old Kyle was seated on a chair beside Denny. Wyatt stood beside a worktable where the ornate goblet rested, clipping his fingernails.

“Look who came for a visit,” Mrs. White said elatedly. “Our *old* friend Nate! I’ve always been taught to show respect for my elders, so Denny, please pull him up a chair front and center.”

Denny retrieved a chair and Nate sat down directly in front of the goblet.

“Friends,” Mrs. White said. “In this humble room, in this obscure town, you are about to witness the dawn of a new era. All of you will be invited to serve me. Those who refuse will face nightmarish consequences. The rest of us are about to embark on a journey that surpasses anything you could possibly imagine. Decades of hiding and studying and preparing have finally reached their culmination!”

Mrs. White seized the goblet and raised it high. “To a new beginning,” she

cried exultantly, and began gulping down the water. She continued drinking until she held out an empty goblet for all to see.

The change began almost immediately. Her stature diminished. Wrinkles smoothed away. Faint freckles came into being. Her clothes hung baggy on her smaller frame. Within a moment, Mrs. White looked ten years old.

Nate leaned forward, eyes narrowed, hands clenched into fists. Denny coughed, muffling the sound as best he could. Everyone in the room watched the young girl in expectant silence.

Her jubilant expression faded. The eye patch fell down around her neck, revealing a vacant socket. The young girl looked around at everyone, no recognition in her eye. She seemed flustered and disoriented. “Who are you?” she finally asked in a small, hesitant voice. “Where am I?”

Using the worktable for leverage, Nate stood up. “You are a lucky little girl,” he said, his age adding a certain dignity to his voice. “Not everyone gets an opportunity to start over with a Clean Slate!”

There was a moment of utter silence. Then John Dart threw his head back and laughed.

Wyatt approached the young girl. “Belinda?”

“Is that my name?” the girl asked. She reached up a hand, touched her vacant eye socket, and jerked it away. “What happened to me? Who are you people?”

Wyatt glared fiercely at Nate. “You put a Clean Slate into the goblet?”

“I still had the one Mrs. White intended for us to use on Mr. Stott,” Nate said. “Before the spider wrapped me up, I tucked it into the waistband of my underpants. It was my last resort. You didn’t even search me for candy.”

Wyatt shook his head. He rubbed a hand against the worktable. A rueful grin crept onto his face. “This probably ranks as the best sucker punch I’ve ever seen,” he murmured to himself.

Wyatt cracked his knuckles. He fixed Nate with a steady gaze. “I’m not glad

you did it,” he growled. “But it’s done. There’s no going back. I’ve seen the Clean Slate in action before. This is over. Her mind is irretrievable.”

“What are you talking about?” the little girl asked.

Wyatt crouched. “You lost your memory,” he explained. “You have no family. Maybe some of these people can help you find a foster home.”

John Dart stood up, hands bound behind his back. He walked toward the Fuse. “What’s your move, Wyatt?”

“Not a step closer, John,” the Fuse said. “Far as I’m concerned, this whole endeavor is a bust. If I didn’t think you’d hunt me down, I might take my leave quietly.”

“From the look of things, you’re running out of unmarked skin,” John said. “My guess is Belinda promised to restore you with her augmented powers.”

“I’ve got enough juice left to take all of you with me,” Wyatt spat.

“Maybe,” John said. “But why perish? Let me take you in.”

“Not a chance,” Wyatt said, backing away. “Never underestimate a Fuse. You’d do well to give me your word you won’t pursue me, and let me depart in peace.”

John looked around the room, making eye contact with Nate and the kids. “You realize I can’t speak for my employers,” John said.

“I’m more worried about you than them,” the Fuse said. “I’ve made it personal with you. I’m going to trust that your employers have bigger fish to fry than a Fuse who bet on the wrong horse and has almost burned out.”

John looked wretched. “All right, for the sake of the kids, I pledge I won’t chase you if you leave immediately.”

The Fuse smirked, dipping his head. “That’s all I needed to hear. Look after little Linda, would you?”

Wyatt ambled out the back door. Nate heard him thumping up the stairs.

John turned to face Nate, a warm smile spreading across his lips. “Nate, I can’t believe it, you’re one in a million.”

Nate grinned as Pigeon, Summer, and Gary shouted words of approval. It was sort of pathetic to watch people tied up on the floor trying to cheer. But he appreciated the sentiment.

“What about me?” Kyle said, standing feebly. “What about Eric?”

“She wasn’t going to change you back,” Nate said. “I used magic to visit the future. She was going to enslave all of us, including you, Denny. Where is Eric, anyway?”

“Upstairs with the dwarf,” Denny said. “They’re both in bed. They’re too injured to be on their feet.”

“We’ll have to go pick up Mr. Stott,” Nate said. “He’s stranded as a coyote in his ice cream truck. Without his help, we wouldn’t have stopped her.”

“What about Trevor?” Summer asked.

“I got him out of the mirror,” Nate said. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Right now I feel really tired.”

Denny pounded a fist into his palm. “Dirt Face, I’ve got to say, I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Nate,” John said, “I’ve never been so thoroughly defeated. We were all helpless. I have to agree with Denny, I didn’t see a way out of this. You have my eternal respect and admiration.”

“Thanks,” Nate said, sitting down. “I’d do it all again if I had to, but ideally, I’d rather not spend the rest of my life as an old man.”

“Don’t worry,” John said with a wink. “I know a guy.”

Epilogue

New Jobs for John



“You guys need any more bean dip?” the coyote inquired.

“I’m stuffed,” Trevor said, rubbing the side of the brace encasing his ribs.

“You sure?” the coyote version of Mr. Stott persisted. “I have several more cans in the pantry.” They were all seated in Mr. Stott’s living room. Half-empty bags of chips littered the coffee table, along with a platter of bagels, several tubs of cream cheese, a bowl with remnants of onion dip, an empty bean-dip container, and a dozen paper cups.

“How about you, Gramps?” Summer asked Nate. “Still hungry?”

Leaning forward on the couch, Nate poked Summer in the thigh with his cane. “I warned you,” he growled. “If you get to call me Gramps, I get to jab you.” Elderly Kyle, sitting beside him, chuckled and coughed.

“We won’t get to call you Gramps much longer,” Pigeon said. “What time is John getting here, anyhow?”

Kyle checked his watch. “Any minute.”

“How about Old Timer?” Trevor tried.

Nate tried to prod him, but Trevor was out of reach.

“Or Old Man Sutter,” Summer said, moving away from Nate. “Or Geezer. Or

Fossil. Or Dinosaur.”

“Nathanosaurus,” Pigeon proposed.

“Laugh it up,” Nate grumbled.

“Up until a few days ago, I would have been hesitant to let John Dart set a foot in this house,” the coyote interjected. “He has a sinister reputation in our circles. But if he hadn’t arranged to have my truck towed here, I’d probably be roaming the hills chasing rabbits by now. He seems to be genuinely trying to set everything right.”

“Is John bringing Linda?” Pigeon asked.

“I believe so,” the coyote said.

“You wouldn’t want her to leave without saying good-bye,” Nate teased.

Pigeon blushed and looked away.

“Pigeon, don’t you think having a thing for her is a little twisted?” Trevor said. “After all, she tried to kill us.”

“Not kill us,” Pigeon corrected. “She was mainly just trying to turn us into mindless slaves. And it wasn’t her, not really. Belinda is gone. Linda is a new person.”

“I think he’s into the eye patch,” Summer said.

“It matches his leather jacket,” Nate observed.

“The patch is sort of cute,” Pigeon mumbled.

“I want to be best man at the wedding,” Trevor joked.

“You’ll have to ask John’s permission,” Summer said. “He already treats her like a daughter.”

There came a heavy knock at the door.

“Speak of the devil and he appears,” the coyote exclaimed.

Pigeon crossed the room to answer the door, but it opened before he arrived. Linda entered, wearing a black eye patch, followed by John, who held a plate stacked with miniature quiches.

“Hey, guys,” Linda said with a small wave. They had all hung out a few times since she had lost her memory. Sweet, friendly, and a little shy, Linda had offered no hint of recalling her former identity.

“Hi, Linda,” Pigeon stammered.

She beamed at him.

“No dip left?” John complained.

“I have some in the cupboard,” the coyote said.

“I’ll help you grab it,” Trevor offered, walking out of the room.

“I brought little quiches,” John said, setting the plate on the coffee table.

“What are quiches?” Nate asked.

“You’ll like them,” Summer said. “They’re soft. You can gum them.”

She was out of reach, so Nate stood up and shuffled toward her, brandishing his cane. Laughing, she ran away from him. “Come back here, you whippersnapper!” Nate called in his most cantankerous voice.

Summer cowered behind John. “Can’t you shoot him or something?”

“You’re on your own,” John said, raising both hands and backing away. Summer shrieked as Nate swatted her leg with his cane.

Trevor and the coyote returned with a can of bean dip. “What happened this time?” Trevor asked, popping the tab on the bean dip and tearing off the lid.

“She said I have to gum my food,” Nate huffed, panting.

“Don’t worry, Nate,” John said. “I’ll have you chewing like a pro again before you know it.”

“Did you bring him?” Kyle asked.

John reached into a bag and pulled out some tortilla chips. He scooped up some of the pasty brown bean dip and put the chips in his mouth. “I just got off the phone with him,” John said around the crunchy mouthful. “He’ll be here any minute. Nate is a lucky boy. Mozag does not normally make house calls. He was impressed by my report, and wanted to see personally to Nate’s well-being. No offense, Kyle, but he’s not here for you. You and Eric will have to journey with me to the lair where the Council meets.”

“Why not fix me while he’s here?”

“The Council wants you and Eric to account for your actions before offering any assistance,” John explained. “They’ll make Sebastian explain his role in all of this as well. I’m confident they’ll restore all of you in the end, though I imagine they’ll have a punishment in mind for you and Eric.”

“Punishment?” Kyle blurted.

John shrugged. “Nothing compared to losing the best years of your life, I assure you.”

“Where does the Council meet?” Kyle asked.

“Ohio.”

“You prepared the vehicle so I can ride in it?” the coyote asked.

“It will serve as a temporary lair,” John said, snatching more chips. “Should be quite a road trip. Two eighty-year-old kids, a little girl with amnesia, and a talking coyote.”

“I want to come,” Pigeon said.

“Who would you sit by?” Trevor asked innocently.

Pigeon blushed vividly.

“After this, I’ll be able to add some new items to my resume,” John mused. “Geriatric nurse, baby-sitter, and zookeeper. Oh, and antiques dealer—I think I found a buyer for the goblet.”

“I actually wouldn’t mind coming with you also,” Trevor said. “My folks have been in a nasty mood all week, arguing and shouting. Mom sent me to bed without dinner for flipping through the channels too quickly. Dad grounded me from riding my bike for sprinkling too much food in the fish tank!”

“My dad sleeps all the time,” Summer said. “He quit shaving and showering. He’s called into work twice already so he can mope around the house in his pajamas. He’s never acted so depressed.”

“My mom has been eating nonstop,” Pigeon said. “Lately she’s been downing brownie batter and milkshakes. And she’s more overprotective than ever. Technically I’m never supposed to see you guys again. Right now she thinks I’m studying at the library.”

“Everybody deals with white fudge withdrawal differently,” the coyote said. “It will pass in another week or so.”

“See, Nate,” John said. “At least you haven’t had cranky parents to contend with.”

“They think I’m missing,” Nate said.

“They contacted the police last week, once the fudge started wearing off,” John acknowledged. “But you can hardly visit them in your current state. We’ll have you back to normal shortly, and then you can enjoy a happy reunion.”

There came a knock at the door. John bounded over and pulled it open. A short old man with bushy white sideburns and a stained Chicago Cubs cap entered holding a platter of sardines. “Sorry I’m late, I’m no good with directions.”

“We’re honored by your presence, Mozag,” John said solemnly.

Mozag waved him away. “Where’s our young hero?”

John gestured at Nate.

“Not so young anymore,” Nate said.

Mozag squinted at him, deep crow’s-feet spreading from the corners of his eyes. “You aren’t nearly as old as you appear. The application of the artificial years was even sloppier than I expected. This treatment will do wonders.”

Nate gave him an incredulous look. “Sardines?”

“Excuse me?” Mozag asked. Then he glanced down at the platter in his hands. “Oh, no, these are for the others. And you as well. And me. Hard to call it a party without sardines.”

“If you say so,” Nate said.

Mozag handed the platter to John and removed a fortune cookie from his pocket. He handed the cookie to Nate. “Don’t crack it open,” Mozag instructed. “Eat it in a single bite. Chew it well.”

“Is there a fortune inside?” Trevor asked.

Mozag studied Trevor, eyeing him up and down. “Nate will get about seventy years back by consuming it, so yes, I would say that the contents of that cookie are definitely worth a fortune.”

“Just eat it?” Nate asked. “Right now?”

“No time like the present,” Mozag said.

“I don’t have any teeth,” Nate said.

Mozag smiled. “Let it soak in your mouth for a moment.”

Nate put the cookie in his mouth, and waited while his saliva gradually softened it. The cookie tasted slightly sugary as he waited. Finally, when the cookie began to feel mushy, Nate started chewing. The inside of the cookie was pasty and salty, not hollow like he had expected. It tasted like there was sausage in the cookie, and corn, and raisins. Finally he swallowed it. “All done,” he

announced.

Mozag squinted at him. “Feel any different?”

“My stomach feels a little sore,” Nate said. Suddenly he began to tingle. The sensation intensified until it burned through all the tissue of his body. His stature diminished. Wrinkles smoothed away and age spots faded. His features became less droopy. His clothes and shoes became loose. Nate stared at his young hands in giddy disbelief.

“It worked!” Pigeon cried triumphantly.

“Almost perfect,” Mozag said, looking at Nate closely. “You’re about seven hours older than you would have been otherwise. Close as I could manage.”

“He looks a little green,” Summer pointed out.

“You’re right!” Trevor echoed. “In his cheeks and around his eyes.”

“Green is good,” Mozag said. “A necessary side effect. The coloring will fade away soon.”

“How long will it take?” Nate wondered.

“Three to five days,” Mozag said.

“Five days!” Nate exclaimed.

“Breaking a curse is no small matter,” Mozag said. “Five days with greenish skin is a small price to pay. While you’re waiting, help yourself to the sardines.”

Mozag grabbed a sardine off the platter and dropped the entire fish into his mouth. He turned and walked toward the door.

“Thank you,” Nate called.

“Don’t mention it,” Mozag replied. “You bailed us out of a tough spot. It’s the least I can do. Don’t forget the temporary preview of your winter years. What a rare opportunity. It will take quite a while to earn your way back. John, a pleasure, as always. The Council will tie up your other loose ends.”

“Thank you,” John said, bowing slightly.

Mozag waved a dismissive hand and walked out the door.

“You sure Nate isn’t stuck with a green complexion?” Kyle asked after the door closed.

John nodded. “You were just in the presence of arguably the most powerful magician in the world. The spell will hold. And the Council knows its business as well. We’ll get Sebastian back on two feet, find a home for Linda, and restore you and Eric to your proper ages.”

“How did Mozag get here?” Pigeon questioned. “I thought magicians needed to remain in their lairs.”

“You don’t miss much,” John said. “He came in a portable lair. And, of course, this is a lair. Plus, that Cubs hat he was wearing is almost as good as a lair. It grants him abnormal mobility for a magician.”

“It looked old,” Trevor said.

“He’s caught eleven foul balls in that hat, all at Wrigley,” John said.

“Let’s get going,” Kyle said. “I’m antsy.”

“Relax,” John assured him. “The hard part is over. This trip will be a piece of cake.”

“Can I use the rest room before we get started?” Linda asked.

“Of course,” the coyote said. “Down the hall on the left. There’s no mirror. It’s a long story.”

Linda walked off down the hall.

“What about you, Sebastian?” John asked. “Want me to let you out back before we get rolling?”

“Actually, sure, if you don’t mind.”

John and the coyote went into the kitchen.

“Well, guys,” Nate said, tossing his cane aside, “I guess we did it.”

They huddled together in a group hug.

“Thanks for saving us, Nate,” Pigeon said seriously.

“You can stop saying that,” Nate said. “A million times is enough.”

“I’m not sure we’ll ever stop saying it,” Summer said.

“We all owe you big,” Trevor added.

“Including Diego,” Pigeon said.

“I’m just happy to put all of this behind me,” Nate said.

“All of it except the jeweled goblet,” Summer reminded him.

“John thinks he might be able to get a lot of cash for it,” Pigeon said.

Nate shrugged. “He said any gold we found was ours to keep. We’ll see.”

“Think he’ll really split the money between us?” Trevor asked quietly.

“I think he keeps his promises,” Nate said.

Linda returned from the bathroom, and John entered alongside the coyote. “Should we get rolling?” John inquired.

“Yes,” Kyle replied. “Before I die of old age!”

Acknowledgments



Perhaps more than any other book of mine so far, *The Candy Shop War* has benefited from feedback gathered from readers and editors. Entire sections of the book were completely transformed multiple times. The reactions I received reshaped the story in ways that helped it become clearer, more inventive, and more appropriate for use in schools.

Key people who provided feedback include Chris Schoebinger, Lisa Mangum, Emily Watts, Caleb Freeman, Josh Freeman, Chandler Labrum, Mary, Pam, Liz, Cherie, and Summer.

In fifth grade I lived in a Northern California town, having moved there the year before. This story owes a lot to that town. Although all of the characters are fictitious, the memories of the adventures I tried to find there with my own club of underage thrill seekers helped spawn this book.

It is tough to name everybody who deserves to be mentioned in a section like this. I need to place some emphasis on the publicity and marketing team at Shadow Mountain and the great work they have been doing. Gail Halladay, Angie Godfrey, Liz Carlston, MaryAnn Jones, Tiffany Williams, and Roberta Ceccherini-Nelli have been making great things happen with getting the word out for this book as well as my *Fablehaven* series. I owe a special thanks to my sister Summer, who has been working for my publisher booking my tour and traveling with me. Her help has been invaluable to the success my books have been enjoying.

Thanks also need to go out to others at Shadow Mountain. Chris Schoebinger—the guy can manage a project. I appreciate the skills of Emily Watts, editor; Brandon Dorman, illustrator; Richard Erickson and Sheryl Dickert, designers;

and Laurie Cook, typographer.

I have to give a special nod to my Uncle Tuck, who loaned me the Flatman from a strange nightmare he had years ago. That guy has some weird things in his head. I hope he'll lend me other odd ideas in the future.

I've been taking some heat for naming certain family members and not others. Since I owe a lot to all of my family, here I go. Parents: Pam and Gary. Siblings: Summer, Bryson, Tiffany, and Ty. Grandparents: Cy, Marge, John, and Gladys. Uncles: Tuck, Danny, Chuck, Dave, and Bob. Aunts: Kim, Trudy, Jody, and Pam. Cousins: Travis, Jason, Mike, Matt, Ashley, Stephanie, Lindsay, Curt, Jason, Dave, Sheena, Nicole, Marisha, and Tanu. I love and appreciate all of you!

Of course my wife and kids need a special acknowledgment. Mary, Sadie, and Chase put up with Daddy traveling a lot to do assemblies at schools, to speak at libraries, and to sign books. I dread when my work takes me away from them, and I love them deeply.

As always, thank you for picking up this book. Without readers, I'd be a crazy guy typing alone in a room. Some of you have expressed concern that this book is releasing before the *Fablehaven* series is even halfway done. Don't worry, I'm working hard! My goal is to release books 3, 4, and 5 in consecutive years. Keep on reading and I'll keep on writing!

Reading Guide



1. Losing the ability to get help from their families limited the options for Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon. How does your family support you during hard times? Who would you turn to if your family was unable to help?

2. In what ways did Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon watch out for one another? What have you done recently to show loyalty to a friend?

3. Between Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon, who would you most want as a friend? Why?

4. Trust was a big issue in this story. Why did the kids trust Mrs. White? How did she lose that trust? Why did they trust Sebastian? Why did they trust John? Who did you trust most as a reader? Why?

5. The kids in the story had to deal with bullies. Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon used a passive approach, giving in to their demands. Nate stood up to them—and sometimes suffered unhappy consequences. What do you think is the best approach for handling bullies?

6. Which of the magic candies in the book would you want most? Which would you want least? Why?

7. If you could invent a type of magic candy, what magical ability or power would it have? What would you call it?

8. What do you imagine the pets you know would say if given Brain Feed?

9. If you had an endless supply of Ironhide jawbreakers, what profession

would you choose? Why?

10. If you had a bag of magical candy corn that had the power of suggestion, who would you talk to? What would you say?

11. Sweet Tooth's white fudge was extremely addictive, thus compelling customers to want more. What treat or food do you find addictive? How many days could you go without eating it?

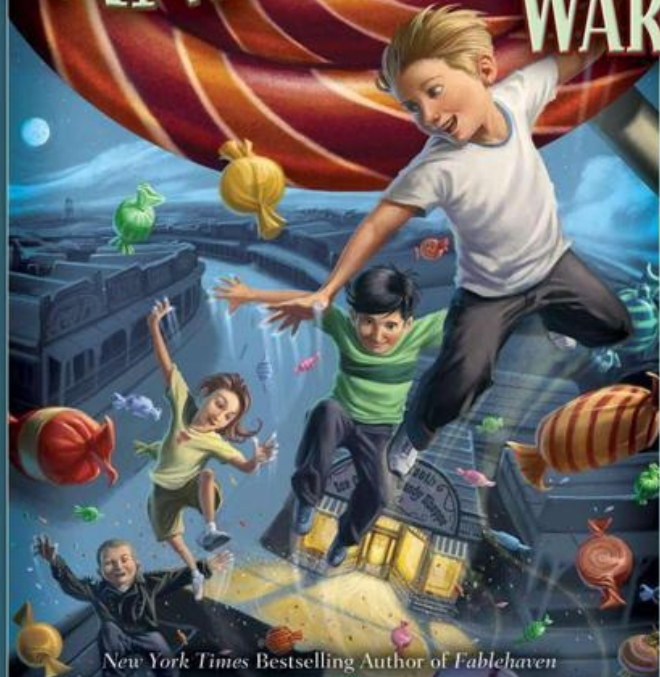
12. Do your parents pay enough attention to you, or does it seem like they're eating too much white fudge? Explain. If you could spend the whole day with your mom or dad, what would you do?

13. If you knew you were going to be trapped inside the mirror world for an indefinite period of time and could bring only what you could fit inside your school backpack, what would you bring?

14. If you could go back to any time in your life for an hour, what time would you visit? What would you change or do?

15. Do you think it would be ethical to give Clean Slates to people convicted of certain crimes? Why or why not?

THE CANDY SHOP WAR



New York Times Bestselling Author of Fablehaven

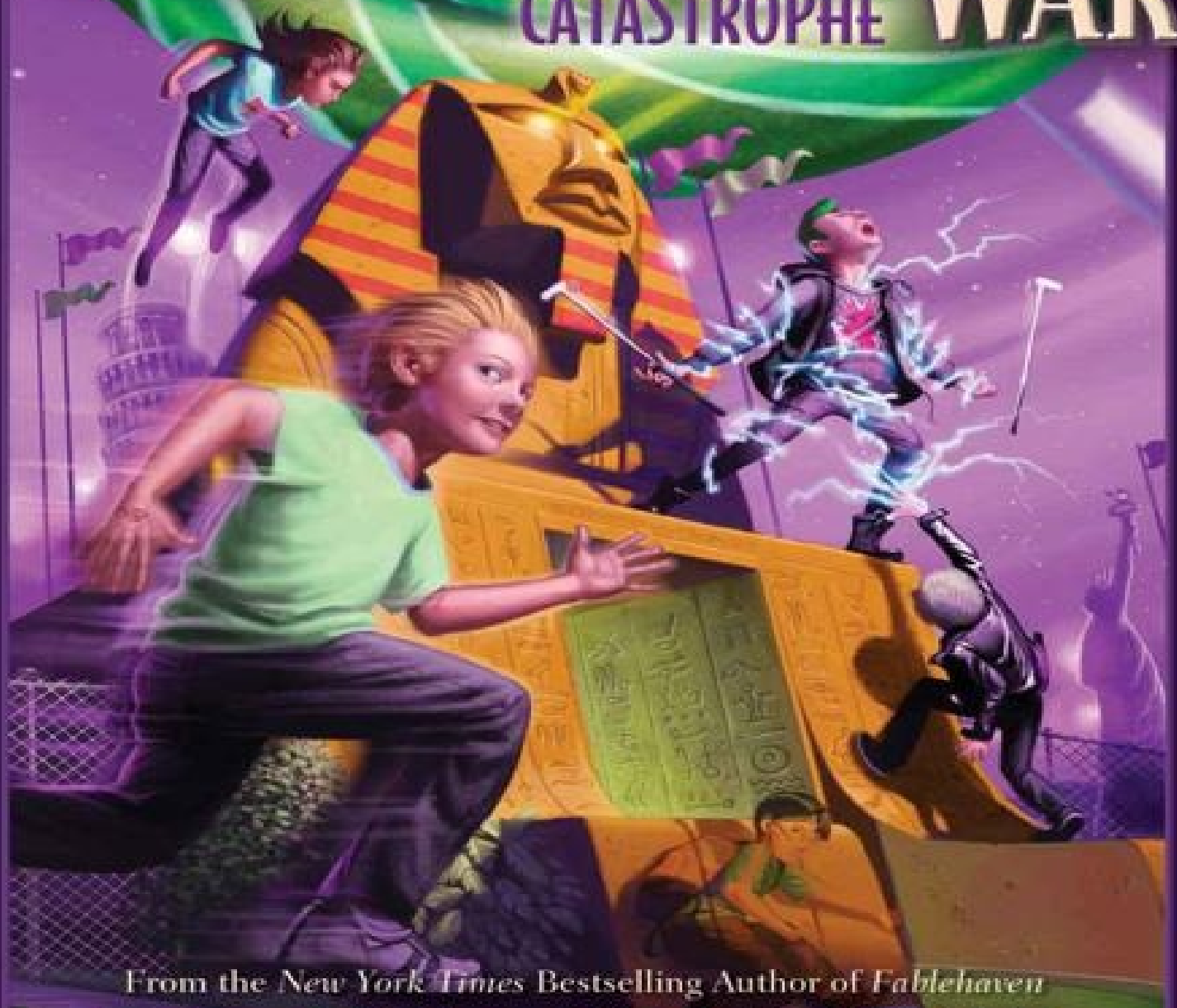
BRANDON MULL

Table of Contents

[John Dart](#)
[The Blue Falcons](#)
[First Day](#)
[Moon Rocks](#)
[White Fudge](#)
[The Museum](#)
[Trick Candy](#)
[A Grave Assignment](#)
[Unearthing Secrets](#)
[Clean Slate](#)
[Ice Cream Man](#)
[Mirror Mints](#)
[Costly Clues](#)
[Chasing a Ship](#)
[The Library](#)
[A Short-Lived Victory](#)
[The Substitute](#)
[House of Haag](#)
[Blue](#)
[Red](#)
[Yellow](#)
[The Goblet](#)
[New Jobs for John](#)
[Acknowledgments](#)
[Reading Guide](#)

THE CANDY SHOP

ARCADIE
CATASTROPHE WAR



From the *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *Fablehaven*

BRANDON MULL

THE CANDY SHOP ARCADE CATASTROPHE WAR

BRANDON MULL



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For Tiff and Ty,

magical candy *and* arcade prizes!

Table of Contents

[Late One Night](#)

[Dead Man's Run](#)

[Advice](#)

[The Battiato Brothers](#)

[Arcadeland](#)

[Tickets](#)

[Lindy](#)

[Odd Hours](#)

[Stamps](#)

[Jets](#)

[Training](#)

[Simulcrist](#)

[The Hermit](#)

[Prisoners](#)

[The Graywaters](#)

[The Guidestone](#)

[The Resistance](#)

[Lighthouse](#)

[The Chest](#)

[Rescue](#)

[Desperate Measures](#)

[The Gate](#)

[The Protector](#)

[Uweya](#)

[Mopping Up](#)

[Breakfast for Dinner](#)

[Note on Locations](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Reading Guide](#)

[The Candy Shop War card game](#)

Late One Night



Roman lay still in the darkness, his covers up to his neck. The hall light had gone out five minutes ago. He heard no murmurs of conversation. Only the whir of the air conditioner interrupted the silence.

He could probably get started, but it would be safer to wait a few more minutes. In the dark, with nothing to do, waiting was hard. Seconds passed like minutes, and minutes dragged like hours. Roman kept losing the staring contest with the digital numbers of his clock as he willed the time to advance.

Bored or not, he chose to wait. If his parents caught him breaking curfew, he would get grounded for even longer. He had almost survived the week. He had not left the house except with family, and he had gone to bed by ten o'clock every night. Once in bed, he was not allowed to have his light on, which meant no reading comics and no drawing.

Ten o'clock might not sound early to some people, but it was summer vacation, and even during the school year, Roman usually stayed up until at least midnight. In the summer he was often awake until well after that.

Now that the end of his punishment was near, it would be tragic to get caught breaking the rules. So far, each night after going to bed, once the house became still, he had clicked on a flashlight under his blankets. Twice he had heard footsteps in the hall as his mother or father came to check on him, and both times he had switched off the light well before his door had inched open.

The air conditioner stopped blowing cool air through the vent high on the wall. The house was quiet. It was probably safe. If he heard somebody coming, he would just be quick.

Roman clicked on his flashlight. Made of shiny metal, it was long and heavy, with a strong bulb. The bright beam provided more than enough light for reading comic books. He had checked how much of that light escaped when he

kept the powerful flashlight under the covers. From outside his room, a person practically had to lie down and stare under the door to see any sign of it.

Roman retrieved his drawing pad and colored pencils from under his bed. He had no new comics, and he was feeling in a creative mood. He flipped past pictures of battleships, dinosaurs, superheroes, and burning buildings. The current image in progress involved three skaters diving out of the way as a monster truck crashed through a brick wall. It was more than halfway done.

He was trying to decide what insignia to put on the most prominent skateboard when he heard distinct tapping at his window. Roman reflexively switched off his flashlight and laid his head down, hiding the drawing pad beneath his chest. He held his breath. The gentle tapping repeated insistently. As the fear of discovery faded, Roman began to wonder who was at his window. Since his bedroom was on the second floor, this was especially strange.

Roman peeked out from under his covers. The glow of streetlights backlit the figure outside his window enough to confirm that it was a person. There was no way one of his parents was out there on the narrow apron of roof. It had to be one of his friends.

None of his friends had ever visited him like this. What if it was a burglar or somebody shady? But would robbers tap persistently to announce their presence? The figure at the window waved and gently tapped again.

Otherwise the house remained quiet. Roman crawled out of bed, crossed to the window, and clicked on his flashlight. The bright beam revealed Marisa, squinting and holding up a hand to shield her eyes.

He switched off the light. What was Marisa doing on his roof? She knew he was grounded. This could get him busted for life!

He unlocked the window and slid it up, grateful that he was in a T-shirt and shorts. When he was feeling hot, Roman sometimes stripped down to his underwear to sleep.

“Hey, Rome,” Marisa whispered, carefully crouching through the window.

“Hi, Risa,” Roman whispered back, glancing nervously at his door. He heard no hint of his parents stirring. “How’d you get on my roof?”

“I have my ways,” she said with a mysterious smile. “You’re almost done being grounded, right?”

“Unless my parents catch you here,” Roman said.

“I won’t stay long,” she promised. “I just wanted to show you something.” She held out her hand. The back was stamped with a blue fighter jet.

“You got it,” Roman said, impressed.

“Chris helped me,” Marisa replied. “Rome, he was right. It’s better than you could guess. Way better. It’s like a passport into the coolest club ever.”

“I know that much,” Roman said. “What kind of club? He would never tell us.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. I promised. You’ll understand when you get yours.”

Roman huffed darkly. “Right. Risa, I’m done. That’s how I got busted in the first place. My parents would destroy me if I went back to that arcade. Besides, I already blew all my money. It wasn’t enough.”

“You have to go back,” Risa insisted. “Chris and I will put up the money.”

“What?”

“The jet stamp comes with perks. I’ve got some spare money now. You’re part of the way there, Rome. Only two jets are left. You have to finish what you started.”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Other people are catching on. Those two jets won’t stay available forever. You need to win one.”

Roman shook his head. “Whether or not I use my own money, I’m not supposed to go to Arcadeland again.”

“That’s why I came,” Marisa said. “I knew you’d think twice before coming back. I get that you’re not supposed to, but you have to do it. Trust me. It’s worth the risk.”

Roman heard the floor creak out in the hall. Chills raced through him. Marisa shot him a worried look. “Go,” he whispered urgently.

“Come to the arcade Saturday morning,” she whispered back, lunging toward the window. “Use any excuse. Just come.”

Marisa dove out the window as the handle of his bedroom door turned softly. Facing the door, Roman winced. There was no time to get back in bed. Not that it would matter. The crash of Marisa slamming onto the roof would give them away.

Except he heard no crash. Not even a creak. Switching off his flashlight, Roman rolled it across the carpeted floor toward his dresser. The door eased open. His dad peeked in. Roman didn’t move, like a wild animal trying to blend with its surroundings. The dark offered some cover, but light from the hall spilled across his empty bed. After a brief pause, the door opened wider.

“Roman?” Dad asked.

“I’m here,” Roman said weakly.

His dad stepped into the room, admitting more light as the door opened all the way. “Why’s your window open?”

“I was hot,” Roman invented desperately, trying to act calm. Although it seemed physically impossible, somehow Marisa had still made no noise. “I was

bored.”

His dad crossed to the window and looked out. Roman’s stomach clenched with worry. How would his dad react when he saw Marisa out there?

But his dad turned away from the window as if he had seen nothing. “You weren’t thinking of climbing out there?”

“What? No way! I’m grounded. Besides, there’s no way down.” There really wasn’t. Not without a ladder. Had Marisa brought a ladder?

“Climbing onto roofs in the dark is a good way to break your neck.”

“I know. I was just stir-crazy. I wanted some air.”

His dad nodded. “All right. I guess I can understand that. You’re supposed to be in bed, you know, but at least your light was off.”

“I wasn’t reading or anything,” Roman said. “Just restless.”

“I get why you’re restless. I’m sure this has felt like a long week. Still, a punishment is no good unless it gets enforced. Hang in there.”

“I will,” Roman said. He walked over to shut the window. Glancing out as casually as possible, he caught no glimpse of Marisa. After closing the window, Roman returned to his bed.

Roman’s dad walked to the door. “Get some sleep.”

“I will. Good night.”

“Night.”

The door closed, leaving the room dark aside from the soft light coming from the face of Roman’s digital clock and the diffused light seeping through the window. Roman waited quietly, letting the minutes pass.

How had Marisa escaped? How had she done it so quietly? He could only imagine that she had dived off the roof. Which meant that Marisa might currently be sprawled on his driveway with a broken neck.

If she had been willing to climb to his window in the middle of the night, the jet club must really be cool. Chris had insisted that earning the stamp was worth it, and apparently Risa agreed. Roman gripped his covers tightly. Risa had even offered to give him money so he could keep earning tickets.

So far Roman had spent all of his personal savings earning prize tickets—more than four hundred dollars. The money had come from the little safe on his dresser, the one with the words *PRIVATE FUND* printed across the back. The money belonged to him, but, except for minor purchases, he was only supposed to spend it with permission. For more than a week before he was grounded, Roman had turned twenties into tokens until he had nothing left. When his parents had caught him, Arcadeland had been forbidden, and his week as an inmate had begun.

Could he really go back there? Chris had promised that the jet stamp would

change his life, and Risa was backing him up.

The house remained quiet. After retrieving his flashlight, Roman crept to the window and opened it. He stepped out onto the roof, the shingles creaking noisily. Again he wondered how Marisa had stayed so silent.

Clicking on the flashlight, he scanned the empty driveway, finding no paralyzed bodies. “Marisa?” he whispered loudly. “Risa? You out there?”

There came no reply.

Roman climbed back into his room, stashed the flashlight, put his drawing pad and pencils away, and then returned to bed. With his mind so full of worries and questions, there was no longer any need to draw.

He had blown his savings at an arcade. No huge deal, right? He was only a kid. There would be plenty of time to earn more.

Still, it was all the money he had saved for his entire life, and he had made his parents angry by sneakily spending it. All to earn a cheesy stamp. The jet stamp had to include amazing perks, or else why would it be worth so many tickets?

Chris was a smart kid, and he had remained adamant. He had insisted that the rewards of the stamp were way cooler than a free lifetime supply of Arcadeland tokens, tons better than free lifetime Arcadeland food and drinks. Chris had promised that Roman would thank him forever. Now Risa too.

Roman pressed his cheek into his pillow. He had no savings left. He had gotten grounded for a week of his precious summer vacation. But if Marisa and Chris would put up the money for him to keep earning tickets, Roman knew he had to go back to Arcadeland.

Dead Man's Run



Straddling his bike, Nate stared down the long slope. He had heard older kids call it Dead Man's Run. The name seemed appropriate. Ruttled by tires and rainfall, the dirt track wound down a steep hillside, skirting sheer edges much of the way. From his current vantage point, some stretches of the path seemed to drop almost vertically. The idea of walking down Dead Man's Run made him uncomfortable, let alone riding a bike.

"Look at her go," Pigeon murmured. Hair buzzed to a uniform bristle, he stood beside Nate, clutching the handlebars of a shabby bike.

Protected by a helmet, elbow pads, knee pads, and gloves, Summer raced fearlessly down the trail on a rusty mountain bike. She reached a long, straight, steep portion of the trail that swooped directly into a banked turn. They had scouted the path beforehand, and Nate knew that a fairly high cliff was hidden just beyond the bend.

Crouching forward, Summer pedaled hard down the slope, gaining way too much speed. There was no chance of making the turn. Instead, Summer used the angled bank as a ramp, hitting it straight on at full speed and then launching into the air.

Once airborne, she kicked away from her bike, sailing higher and farther than the laws of physics should have allowed as the bike tumbled out of view. Her gliding trajectory was possible only thanks to the Moon Rock in her mouth. The candy reduced the effect of gravity on her, although it did not entirely erase the pull, as was proved when Summer gradually curved out of view.

"Think she'll be okay?" Lindy asked.

"We'll know in a minute," Pigeon said, holding up his walkie-talkie. He pressed the talk button. "How does she look?"

"She won't make it all the way to me," Trevor replied. "She'll clear most of the slope. What a jump! She's waiting to bite, cutting it close. Okay, she froze

just in time. She did it perfectly, just before hitting the ground. Still frozen. Still frozen. Now she's down. She's fine. Over."

"Let us know when she reaches you."

"Will do."

Nate was glad to hear that Summer had timed her bite right. Earlier in the summer, through accidental experimentation, they had discovered that biting a Moon Rock temporarily froze you in space, no matter how fast or slow you were moving at the time. The knowledge came in handy. Even with reduced gravity, if you fell a long way, you could eventually build up enough speed to really hurt yourself.

The experience of biting a Moon Rock was not comfortable—it felt like a jolt of electricity, made your ears ring, and left you temporarily dizzy. But your body suffered no lasting damage from the sudden stop, and the results were very reliable. The knowledge that biting a Moon Rock served as instant brakes had allowed them to attempt some risky stunts with the candy. You had to make sure to bite only when close to the ground, because after you unfroze, all the antigravity effects of the Moon Rock would be gone and you would fall like normal.

"She'll probably win," Lindy said.

Nate stared at the redhead. Less than a year ago, Lindy had been an aging magician named Belinda White. She had originated the formula for Moon Rocks and several other magical treats. Mr. Stott had raided her notes and learned to replicate many of her creations, adding them to his growing menu of supernatural candy.

But Lindy retained no memory of her previous life. At the same time as she had sipped water from the Fountain of Youth, she had also unknowingly consumed a Clean Slate—a potent confection of her own design that had completely erased her identity. She currently lived with Mr. Stott, who had adopted her after John Dart had provided the necessary paperwork. She had joined Nate and his friends for most of their fifth-grade year and now routinely spent time with them during the summer. They called themselves the Blue Falcons, and they regularly experimented with magical candy.

"Don't count us out," Pigeon said. "Ironhides might still prove to be the best candy for downhill racing. Summer fell a long way, but I'll fall faster."

"Hopefully I won't fall at all," Nate added.

The walkie-talkie crackled. "She made it to me. Just over one minute."

"That'll be hard to beat," Pigeon conceded.

"We'll see." Nate pulled out a stick of Peak Performance gum. Unlike Pigeon and Summer, who had bought junky secondhand bikes for this contest,

he was riding his own bike. To be safe, he had on elbow pads and a helmet, but he expected that the heightened state of awareness and coordination provided by Peak Performance would allow him to make it down without any mishaps.

He put the gum in his mouth and started chewing. It was hard to feel the effects of Peak Performance unless you were in motion. He had used the gum on many occasions, and it had never failed him. "Tell Trevor to start the stopwatch," Nate said.

"Ready with the time?" Pigeon asked into the walkie-talkie.

"Just a second," came the reply. "Okay, I'm ready."

"On your mark," Pigeon said into the walkie-talkie. "Get set. Go!"

Nate started down Dead Man's Run. It still looked freaky, but now that he was moving, he had an instinctive sense for where to guide his bike. Subtleties of balance and momentum that he had never perceived suddenly felt like second nature. He pedaled hard but resisted going as fast as he could. He could sense the limits of what he could handle without losing control.

With the wind in his face, Nate rode as he had never imagined possible. He let his rear wheel slide as he rounded tight corners. He took jumps to avoid rocky patches. When the way was straight, he tucked forward, zooming with suicidal confidence, only to hit the brakes and fishtail around a hairpin corner. Dirt sprayed. Rocks tumbled. His stomach lurched as he jumped to a lower portion of the trail, shortening a switchback.

He knew he should be terrified. Without Peak Performance, he would have wrecked his bike a dozen times. Yet somehow he managed to enjoy the exhilaration rather than fear the danger.

The exertion did not tire him. Chewing Peak Performance meant you could run at a full sprint without ever feeling winded. Maximum effort seemed like no big deal for as long as the magic lasted.

Trevor and Summer came into view. Trevor was quite a bit taller than her now, having gained a few inches during the school year. The way was getting less steep, so Nate pedaled with everything he had, skidding to a stop after he passed Trevor.

"A minute twenty-one," Trevor reported.

"What did Summer get?" Nate asked.

"A minute six," Trevor replied. "You looked awesome coming down, though. I wish I had it on video!"

"It felt pretty awesome," Nate admitted, disappointed that he had come in second. Still, coming in fifteen seconds behind somebody who had glided most of the way down the mountain wasn't too bad. And unlike Summer, he hadn't trashed his bike in the process. Now the only question was whether Pigeon

would put him in last place.

Trevor relayed the exact time through the walkie-talkie.

“Pretty quick,” Lindy replied. “Pigeon is ready to go. Is the timer set?”

“Ready when you are,” Trevor responded.

“Great. Ready, set, go!”

Trevor tapped his stopwatch.

Nate looked up the hill. The contours of the landscape currently hid the top of the trail from sight. The brush on the hill was golden brown in response to the dry summer weather, interrupted by jutting rocks, patches of dirt, and an occasional oak tree. Evening was fading. They had timed their contest carefully, hoping the hillside would be deserted by sunset, since most bystanders would have had questions about a girl flying hundreds of yards through the air. So far, nobody had disturbed them.

Pigeon was sucking on an Ironhide as he came down the hill. The jawbreaker would prevent his skin from tearing and his bones from breaking. It made him no stronger or faster, but while the candy lasted, it would be just about impossible for him to get injured.

When Pigeon first came into view, he had clearly already fallen. The Ironhide did not prevent him from getting dirty, nor did it prevent his clothes from ripping and accumulating prickles from the weeds.

Of the five friends, Pigeon was the least confident on a bike. It showed. He took a corner too fast and plowed into a small boulder, catapulting over the handlebars and landing in a cloud of dust and sliding rocks. He was on his feet instantly, scrambling up the trail to retrieve his bike.

Back astride the bike, he reached the steep run where Summer had left the trail by jumping off the banked turn. Pigeon hit the same ramp at a high velocity, but instead of floating a ridiculous distance through the air, he demonstrated what gravity was supposed to do when somebody rode a bike off a cliff.

Losing his forward momentum, he fell with increasing speed before slamming into a cluster of jagged rocks, his husky body tumbling and cartwheeling, arms and legs flailing loosely. The rusty bike crumpled on impact and bounced along beside him. It was the kind of spine-crushing accident that should have been fatal. Even knowing that Pigeon was sucking on an Ironhide, Nate found himself wringing his hands.

Once Pigeon stopped somersaulting and sliding, he got up. He hustled to the bike, but the front tire was shaped like a taco and the frame was bent or maybe broken. Turning, Pigeon raced recklessly toward them on foot, falling twice as he jumped off small ledges.

Panting and sweaty, his clothes torn and dusty, Pigeon reached Trevor and

flopped to the ground. Although he seemed exhausted, there was no blood on him.

“One minute, fifty-three seconds,” Trevor reported.

“Last place?” Pigeon wheezed.

“You had the best crash,” Summer consoled.

“Did it hurt?” Nate wondered.

Pigeon sat up. “No. It freaked me out, though. I thought I was dead for a second there.”

“Here comes Lindy,” Trevor announced.

Nate turned to watch. She was using Peak Performance and riding her own bike, just as he had. He wondered if her magic eye would give her an advantage.

Lindy had been missing an eye when Mr. Stott took over as her guardian, but a powerful magician named Mozag had provided a replacement. The glass eye looked perfectly real but could see better than a normal human eye. With her replacement eye, Lindy could see in the dark, zoom in on distant objects like a telescope, and even recognize different temperatures.

Whether the eye was helping or not, Lindy came tearing down the hillside like a professional stuntwoman with a death wish. Nate wondered if he had looked that good while taking wild jumps and careening around corners. She skidded to a stop near the others with impressive precision.

“What a rush,” she said with a huge grin.

“You were cruising,” Trevor complimented. “You should have had me time you.”

Lindy shook her head. “Three contestants, one for each candy.” She looked down at Pigeon, who was still sitting in the dirt. “You look like you were hit by a train.”

Pigeon gave a weak smile. “Welcome to my life. Not only did I come in last, I’m also the most tired and filthy.”

“I wasn’t timed,” Lindy said. “Let’s say you beat me.”

“I don’t need your pity,” Pigeon said, getting to his feet. “You looked just as fast as Nate.”

Trevor stuffed his stopwatch and walkie-talkie into a backpack. “Moon Rocks definitely won as the fastest way down the mountain.”

“I thought they would,” Lindy reminded everyone. “But Peak Performance wasn’t far behind.”

“And my bike wasn’t totaled,” Nate chimed in.

Lindy nodded thoughtfully. “If we could mix Peak Performance with an Ironhide and a sturdy bike . . .”

“Can’t risk mixing candies,” Pigeon said. “Instead of a combined effect,

you might get something unexpected. Like your head bursting apart.”

“I said ‘if,’” Lindy pointed out. “*If* we could find a safe way to mix the candies, great skill and much riskier jumps might combine to have a chance.”

“I lost a lot of time going back for the bike when I crashed,” Pigeon said. “And I’m a lousy sprinter.”

“I could have hit the jump a little better,” Summer said. “I could probably shave a few more seconds off my time.”

“If we were mixing,” Nate said, “Peak Performance and Moon Rocks would probably beat Peak Performance and Ironhides.”

“It’s all speculation,” Pigeon complained. “We can’t test it out.”

“It can still be fun to speculate,” Lindy said.

Pigeon shrugged.

Trevor elbowed Nate and jerked his head in the direction opposite from the hillside. Nate looked where Trevor had indicated and saw a pair of blocky men in suits walking toward them.

“Am I seeing double?” Nate asked.

“There are two of them,” Lindy confirmed. “And yes, they look almost identical. They must be twins. One has a small mark on his neck. It could be mistaken for a mole from a distance, but it’s actually a tiny tattoo of a rosebud.”

The men evidently saw the kids looking because one of them waved. The pair strode directly toward them. Both men had dark hair, and binoculars hung from their necks. Nate waved back. “What do you think they want?” he murmured.

“They don’t have bikes,” Trevor noted. “They’re not dressed for hiking.”

“They have binoculars,” Summer observed. “Were they spying on us?”

“I knew we shouldn’t have used the candy in such a public place,” Pigeon groaned. “Without white fudge clouding people’s minds, it was only a matter of time before we got caught.”

“This isn’t a very public place,” Nate said. “We’re practically in the wilderness. And it’s late. We were keeping watch.”

“Apparently not well enough,” Pigeon said. “Do we make a run for it? You guys could use your bikes. Summer and I can use Moon Rocks.”

“What if they’re just bird-watchers?” Trevor said.

“In suits?” Summer replied doubtfully. “Here? Now? They look like government guys.”

“They look really similar,” Lindy said. “Maybe they’re clones.”

“We should start moving away from them,” Nate said. “We don’t need to run. We can just act like we’re heading home. If they chase us, then we can start using candy.”

“Sounds good to me,” Trevor seconded.

They turned and started marching away from Dead Man’s Run in a direction that would let them avoid the men in suits. Nate, Trevor, and Lindy walked their bikes so that Pigeon and Summer could keep pace.

“A moment of your time,” one of the men called.

Nate looked back. One of the men had his hands cupped around his mouth. The other was waving both hands over his head.

Nate stopped walking. “We need to get home,” he called.

“We have a mutual friend,” the man called back. “John Dart.”

Nate exchanged glances with his friends. They hadn’t heard from John in months.

“What do you think they want?” Pigeon asked.

“They could be faking,” Trevor warned. “They could be bad guys.”

“What do you want?” Nate hollered.

“Just a few words,” the man called back. “We know all about you. John is in trouble. We’re all on the same side.”

Nate looked to his friends again.

“If they found us here,” Summer said, “they’ll find us again.”

“Might as well get it over with,” Pigeon said.

“Stay ready for trouble,” Nate warned before raising his voice. “All right. Let’s talk.”

Reversing his direction, Nate led the others toward the heavysset men. The duo waited patiently as the kids approached. Their dark gray suits had faint pinstripes. The blue handkerchiefs peeking from their breast pockets matched their neckties. Both suits looked worn and a little rumpled. The men had stocky necks and wide builds, and both wore large black shoes. Their blunt faces were not handsome, with heavy eyebrows and fleshy lips. Weighty rings adorned each thick-fingered hand.

Nate stopped about five yards from the men. “Who are you guys?”

“We work with John Dart,” said the man on the left. His deep voice was slightly hoarse. He enunciated each word clearly.

“That isn’t an answer,” Summer pointed out.

The other man shrugged. “I’m Ziggy Battiato, and this is my brother Victor.”

“You’ve been watching us?” Nate asked.

“You’ve been sloppy,” Victor replied. “We’ve tailed you for three days. We know where each of you lives. We see you frequenting the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. We’ve seen you using magical enhancers out in the open.”

“We’re careful,” Pigeon protested.

“You take some rudimentary precautions,” Ziggy allowed. “But anyone intent on learning your secrets would have little trouble.”

“John is missing,” Victor said. “When did you last see him?”

Nate held out a hand for the others to keep silent. “How do we know you’re not bad guys using us for information on him?”

“We haven’t tranquilized you,” Ziggy said, opening his coat enough to flash a pistol.

“We’re here to help,” Victor said steadily.

“What can it hurt?” Lindy said. “It’s been some time. We last saw him in March. March twelfth.”

Nate glanced at her. For somebody who had forgotten her identity, she sometimes had an uncanny memory.

Ziggy gave a nod. “Makes sense. He didn’t want to interfere in your lives more than necessary. John went missing a month ago. He was last seen not far from here. But you never heard from him? No final message?”

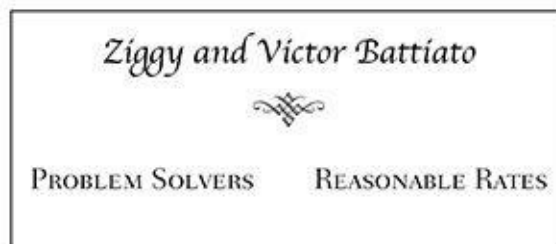
Nate shook his head. “Nothing since March.”

Ziggy and Victor shared a look. Victor faced the kids. “John would be angry with us for asking, but would you be willing to help us find him?”

“Yes,” Nate said. “As long as you’re really his friends.”

Ziggy gave Nate a measuring stare. “Good answer. You’re smart to be cautious.” He held out a business card. Nate accepted it.

“You kids spend time with Sebastian Stott,” Victor said.



“Let him have a look at that card. If we check out, come to Schwendiman’s All-You-Can-Eat Buffet tomorrow at noon. We’ll talk more then.”

Advice



Nate and the others accompanied Lindy home to the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. She lived with Mr. Stott in the apartment above the store. By the time they arrived it was almost dark.

The shop had recently closed, but Lindy had a key. The interior looked much the same as when Mrs. White had run the business. Tables and chairs with chrome legs were arranged on a black and white checkerboard floor. A vast assortment of candy both familiar and exotic crowded the shelves behind the long, L-shaped counter. None of the magical candy was on display. All supernatural treats were stored in the back.

Lindy led the way to the stairs and up to the apartment. She opened the door and called, “Dad!”

Sebastian Stott came into view, wearing a tweed jacket with patches on the elbows. Underneath his coat was a blue T-shirt with a picture of a frowning stick figure. The words *FEED ME* were printed beneath. Mr. Stott’s neatly trimmed beard had two thick, dark streaks interrupting the silver. His eyebrows were a bit unruly. Despite his age, he was robust, with a hearty voice and searching eyes.

“Hello, Lindy,” Mr. Stott greeted with grandfatherly warmth. He looked at the others. “I wasn’t expecting all of you. How did the experiment go?”

“Moon Rocks won,” Summer said. “Peak Performance took second, Ironhides third.”

“Hard to beat jumping down a mountain,” Mr. Stott said. “Is everyone all right?”

“We had some visitors,” Nate said, handing over the business card. “They said they know John Dart. I guess he’s missing.”

Mr. Stott studied the card. He held it up to a light and squinted at it from varying distances. Then he gave the kids a long stare. “The Battiato brothers have quite a reputation.”

“Are they on our side?” Trevor asked.

“They’re certainly on John’s side,” Mr. Stott answered. “All magicians are a little wary of their kind.”

“They’re policemen like John?” Nate asked. “Policemen for magicians?”

“That’s how they see it,” Mr. Stott said. “Not all such operatives wield their authority as responsibly as others. I could tell you some stories. But yes, the Battiatos work for Mozag. I’ve never met them, but this card bears markings that confirm their legitimacy. What did they want?”

“They want us to help them find John,” Summer said.

Mr. Stott nodded vaguely. “I had heard that John went missing.”

“You heard?” Pigeon exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I didn’t want to upset you,” Mr. Stott replied. “And frankly, I didn’t want you involved. It isn’t safe. These thugs should be ashamed for asking children to do their dirty work.”

Nate raised his eyebrows. “We’ve had some experience.”

“I seem to remember other people making use of us in the past,” Summer added.

Mr. Stott cleared his throat uncomfortably, his eyes flicking to Lindy. “That was then. You were already involved, and it was an emergency.”

“If John is missing, that sounds like an emergency to me,” Pigeon said.

“John dealt fairly with us,” Mr. Stott acknowledged. “I wish him no harm. Quite the contrary, I would help if I could.”

“We know,” Trevor said. “You can’t leave your lairs. It’s either this store, your house, or your ice cream truck.”

“I’m more limited than most magicians,” Mr. Stott said. “I don’t have servants or engineered apprentices. I’m trying to keep it simple. I make delicious treats, both regular and enchanted. I tend my store. And I try to keep an eye on you kids.”

“We owe John,” Nate said. “Without him, we would never have survived Mrs. White.” He tried not to let his eyes stray to Lindy. She had heard them discuss Mrs. White before. She knew that Mrs. White had owned this store. But Lindy had no idea that she used to be Mrs. White. In her mind, she was simply Lindy Stott, an adopted orphan with no clear memories of her life before Mr. Stott took her in.

“He put everything right for us after all the craziness,” Summer said. “He and Mozag.”

“John would not want you kids involved,” Mr. Stott asserted.

“That doesn’t mean he doesn’t need our help,” Nate countered.

“Or that he wouldn’t be grateful,” Trevor added.

Mr. Stott sighed. "Before he disappeared, John warned me that something big was going on locally."

"You never told us," Pigeon accused.

"Of course not," Mr. Stott said. "Any such information would only have tickled your curiosity."

"What is it?" Summer asked.

"He never specified," Mr. Stott replied. "He was investigating. He just wanted me to stay alert and to keep you kids away from Walnut Hills."

"How were you supposed to do that?" Trevor asked. "Walnut Hills is the next town over. We live right next door."

"If you haven't noticed how I've kept you away," Mr. Stott said, "then I'm doing my job correctly. I've done my best to suggest excursions here in Colson, or to the west of town, and to discourage any activities that might take you east into Walnut Hills."

"My mom shops at the Walnut Hills Mall all the time," Pigeon said. "Should I warn her?"

Mr. Stott shrugged. "I have no idea what the danger entails."

"We should at least hear what the Battiatos have to say," Nate proposed. "Partly in case we can help John, partly so we can learn more about the threat."

"I agree," Lindy said. "We can't turn our backs on John. He's like an uncle."

Mr. Stott scratched his beard uncomfortably. "If the Battiatos contacted you, they are here to draw you in. These men are professionals. If you speak with them, you'll end up wanting to work with them."

"If it really means helping John, I already want to work with them," Nate said. "Without him, I would be stuck as an old man."

"The Battiatos are legitimate," Mr. Stott said reluctantly. "But you could become embroiled in something very precarious. Think about it before you rush in. If somebody got the best of John, that person spells serious trouble."

"If somebody got the best of John," Pigeon remarked, "we're probably already in major trouble. Lots of people in town almost had their lives ruined by Mrs. White last year, and they had no idea. I don't want to get blindsided. I'd rather be able to put up a fight."

"Where did they want to meet?" Mr. Stott wondered.

"Schwendiman's All-You-Can-Eat," Lindy said.

"That's practically in Walnut Hills!" Mr. Stott protested.

"Lots of Colson is practically in Walnut Hills," Summer pointed out. "That happens when you share a border."

"I don't like it," Mr. Stott said. "Why can't they come here?"

“Wouldn’t they worry about entering the lair of a magician?” Pigeon asked.

“They already set up the meeting,” Nate said. “We don’t have another way to contact them. Besides, Schwendiman’s is usually crowded. It isn’t like they’re luring us away to some remote place.”

“I’m not worried about them harming you directly,” Mr. Stott said. “I’m worried about them getting you involved in a potentially hazardous situation.”

“We don’t even know what they want yet,” Lindy observed.

“I prefer it that way,” Mr. Stott said. “I try to be open-minded. I let you kids use magical candy more than many would consider prudent. But you don’t want to get involved with magical enforcers. The best of them have poor life expectancies.”

“We get that it could be risky,” Nate insisted. “We don’t want to do this for fun. We’re worried about John. And if something fishy is going on right beside us in Walnut Hills, we’d be smart to learn whatever information the Battiatos can share.”

Mr. Stott shrugged. “I expressed my concerns. I can’t stop you kids from going. I’m directly responsible only for Lindy.”

“Can I go?” Lindy pleaded.

“Not all of you need to hear their proposal,” Mr. Stott said. He took Lindy by the hand. “Knowing what I know, I would be a poor father if I let you consort with the Battiato brothers. If your friends insist on meeting with them, they can fill us in later.”

“That’s so unfair!” Lindy fumed. “I’m the one who spotted the tiny rosebud on Ziggy!”

“What?” Mr. Stott asked.

“It’s a way to tell them apart,” Pigeon said.

Mr. Stott looked at Nate. “Will you be going?”

“I just wanted to make sure they weren’t bad guys,” Nate said. “I get that something dangerous is probably going on, but if it might help John, I’ll be at that meeting.”

Mr. Stott gave a nod. “Keep your guard up. Make no promises or commitments. Don’t answer any questions they have no business asking.”

“We’ll be careful,” Summer promised.

Mr. Stott faced Lindy. “Your friends will tell you all about it.”

“What if I go anyway?” Lindy asked defiantly.

“Then you will reap the consequences,” Mr. Stott said. “Tomorrow I want you here with me until your friends come to share what they have learned.”

Pigeon checked the hour as he approached his front door. It was later than

the time he had told his Aunt Rhonda to expect him. Fortunately, his parents were away on an anniversary retreat, and Aunt Rhonda was not nearly as fussy as his mother.

Hurrying through the door, Pigeon raced up to his room. He wanted to get rid of his tattered clothes before his aunt saw him.

“Is that you, Paul?” Aunt Rhonda called.

“Yes!” he replied. “Just a second. I have to use the bathroom.”

He had worn old clothes, knowing they would probably get mangled. He hurriedly changed into a more presentable outfit, then pulled a shoe box out from under his bed. It contained a modest rock collection, along with his supply of Brain Feed. He scooped some pebbles of Brain Feed into his pocket, replaced the shoe box, and hustled downstairs.

Aunt Rhonda leaned against the kitchen counter perusing a gossip magazine. She looked up as Pigeon entered. “Just because it stays light forever this time of year doesn’t mean the clocks stop ticking. Your sisters are already in bed.”

“Sorry, I was riding bikes with my friends. I’ll do better tomorrow.”

Aunt Rhonda shrugged. “I am the oldest in your mom’s family. The oldest has to deal with all sorts of extra hassles. There should be some perks.”

Pigeon grinned. “Do you mind if I go outside to see Diego?”

“Go ahead. But then get ready for bed afterward.”

“Deal.”

As Pigeon headed out the back door, his Labrador padded over to him, then paused, looking up expectantly. Mr. Stott had fiddled with his Brain Feed recipe over the past several months, trying to increase the duration of the effect. No animal had received close to the quantities Diego had consumed. Not only had the heightened intelligence and capacity for speech granted by the kibbles started lasting longer, a permanent increase in intelligence was gradually becoming evident. Even without the Brain Feed, Diego had become a better companion than ever and could now reliably respond to a wide variety of commands.

Pigeon cupped some Brain Feed in his palm and dumped the bits of food on the patio. Diego gobbled up all traces in no time.

“Much better,” Diego sighed. “I can tell something is off when I don’t have the Brain Feed. As soon as I eat, my memories return with sharper clarity. It’s as if I remember the dream better after awakening.”

“Mr. Stott thinks eventually the effect could become permanent,” Pigeon said.

“Wouldn’t that be nice? No more sleepwalking through most of my life. Aren’t you up a little late?”

“We had an eventful day.”

Diego sat up attentively. “Tell me about it.”

“John Dart might be in trouble. Looks like we have some new bad guys in town.”

“I’m here if you need me.”

“We might,” Pigeon admitted. “We were at Mr. Stott’s tonight. He’s worried about us getting involved. Honestly, so am I. We were in over our heads last time.”

“How did you hear about the trouble?”

“Some friends of John tracked us down. They’re magical police, like him.”

“Who are the bad guys? What do they want?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Pigeon replied. “We’ll get details tomorrow.”

“Do you *want* details?”

Pigeon sat down, placing his elbow on his knee and his chin on his hand. “I’m not sure. What if we end up trying to deal with another Mrs. White?”

Diego shook his coat. “Not a cheerful thought. Speaking of our former archenemy, how is Lindy?”

Pigeon gave a neutral shrug. “She’s sad that Mr. Stott doesn’t want her meeting with the magical police.”

“They know about her,” Diego said.

“Probably. Mozag and John Dart know, so I expect these guys do as well. I just think Mr. Stott is worried what bad magicians might do if they find out about her.”

“Like try to bring her memory back?”

“I don’t know,” Pigeon said. “Mr. Stott examined the recipe for the Clean Slate. He says making one is really difficult. He doesn’t think he could do it. But he assured us that the effects of the Clean Slate should be permanent. He was worried for a while that mixing the Clean Slate with water from the Fountain of Youth could have weakened the magic. Different types of magic don’t always blend well. But after studying the issue, he determined that the effects of the Clean Slate would actually be strengthened by the changes induced by the fountain.”

“So nobody can bring her memory back,” Diego verified.

“As far as we can tell,” Pigeon said. “Of course, the other worry is that deep down Lindy is naturally evil. It might only be a matter of time before she heads down a dark path again.”

“The old nature-versus-nurture argument,” Diego said. “Hopefully Belinda turned evil because of the way she was raised. Her behavior might have been influenced by bad examples or difficult circumstances.”

“Mr. Stott has searched,” Pigeon said, “but he hasn’t learned much about her younger days.”

“You’re worried about her,” Diego said. “You like her.”

“I like her a lot. Am I nuts? She’s cute and really fun to hang out with. Most kids don’t think a lot before they speak. She’s different. She listens and she’s smart. She might not have her memories, but she has a quick mind and an adult vocabulary. That can be hard to find.”

“You have an unusual mind yourself,” Diego said. “In some ways, you’re older than your years. It must make you lonely sometimes.”

“None of my friends are dumb,” Pigeon hurriedly clarified. “But kids like Lindy are pretty impossible to find. It’s just weird to like her so much when she used to be a dangerous, magical old lady. She could have killed us! Part of me is always nervous she’s going to turn psychotic.”

“Considering who she used to be, that is probably a healthy concern.”

Pigeon rubbed Diego’s head, then scratched behind his neck. “I’m glad I have you to talk with.”

“I’m not called *man’s best friend* for nothing,” Diego replied. “That feels wonderful. Can you scratch a little lower? Mmmm, that’s the spot.”

“What should I do about the meeting tomorrow?”

“With the magical cops?”

Pigeon nodded.

“You’re already involved,” Diego said. “You might as well go learn the specifics.”

“I was afraid you might say that.”

The Battiato Brothers



Schwendiman's All-You-Can-Eat Buffet stood in the parking lot of a strip mall near a pet shop, a frozen yogurt franchise, and a grocery store. Nate, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon stashed their bikes before walking around to the front. Nate found the Battiato twins waiting just beyond the door, dressed in suits, their expressions neutral.

One of the brothers consulted a heavy wristwatch. "Right on time. If anything, thirty seconds early."

"Ziggy appreciates punctuality," Victor said.

Ziggy straightened his suit coat. "It's considerate."

"We're all here," Victor told the hostess, a young brunette with some purple in her hair.

The restaurant was fairly busy. Diners milled about, selecting food from counters protected by sneeze guards. Much of the food was kept warm in steam trays. The waitress guided the Battiatos to a padded booth that curved two-thirds of the way around a table. It looked just the right size for a party of six.

Knowing he would head to the buffet later, Nate had eaten a small breakfast. The sight of all the food had his stomach rumbling.

Ziggy motioned for the kids to scoot in. Victor sat at one end of the curved bench, Ziggy at the other.

"Have you eaten here before?" the hostess asked.

"Not this particular establishment," Victor said. "But believe me, we know the drill."

"Fair enough," she said. "Enjoy your meal."

Food first?" Ziggy asked generally.

"Sure," Trevor seconded.

"I could eat," Nate said.

Victor and Ziggy stood up in unison. Ziggy rolled his head in a slow circle, making his neck pop. Victor noisily cracked his knuckles, surveying the restaurant stoically.

Ziggy nodded at Victor. "It's showtime."

Nate bit his lip to stifle a laugh.

Nate and the others followed Victor and Ziggy over to the food counters. Pigeon collected a chilled plate and began putting lettuce onto it.

"What are you doing?" Nate asked him.

"I've come here before," Pigeon said. "I guess salad first is a habit."

"No parents today," Nate reminded his friend. "You can get anything."

Shrugging, Pigeon added croutons and some ranch dressing, then grabbed a roll and a couple of squares of butter. "I don't mind salad. I'll get other stuff later."

Nate filled his first plate with fries and tater tots, putting plenty of ketchup and ranch on the side. He had to look around for a moment to find the forks and napkins. Then he returned to the table.

Ziggy stood beside the table, his pair of plates heaped with hot wings, thinly sliced prime rib, and lamb skewers. He chuckled as Nate slid down the bench next to Pigeon. "Rookie mistake."

"What?" Nate asked, glancing over at the husky man.

"You're loading up on fries," Ziggy said. "Your friend has salad and bread. That's all filler. Like soda. You have to save room for the good stuff."

Victor approached the table, his plates heavy with meat. He stood aside so Pigeon could enter the booth next to Summer. Once the four kids were seated, Ziggy and Victor took their places at the ends.

Ziggy stared across at Victor's plates. "I missed the bacon-wrapped turkey."

"Which is why I brought enough for both of us," Victor replied, giving some to his brother. "I told you not to rush. A good general surveys his battlefield."

"I found good grub," Ziggy said, trading plates with his brother.

"You guys take this pretty seriously," Nate commented.

"This is our domain," Ziggy said, indicating the room with his fork. "We were made for this."

"Welcome to the big show," Victor said, taking a large bite of prime rib.

"Not bad," Ziggy said, licking his lips.

"Why don't you get started so I can find out?" Victor complained.

"Wait," Trevor asked, brow furrowed, "why does he have to start for you to find out?"

"And why did you guys switch plates?" Summer wondered.

“That’s an observant question,” Ziggy said, stabbing a chunk of bacon-wrapped turkey with his fork. He deposited the greasy morsel into his mouth.

Victor nodded appreciatively, then dabbed his lips with a napkin. “Our enemies know, so you can as well. Ziggy and I share an unusual connection. I taste only what he tastes and I smell only what he smells. The food I eat nourishes me, but he gets all the sensations.”

“Vice versa for me,” Ziggy said. “If I want to try the wings, Victor has to eat them.”

“Weird,” Pigeon said. “What about sight and hearing?”

“Thankfully we see and hear for ourselves,” Victor said. “Otherwise it would be complicated. We sometimes get brief glimpses of what the other sees or hears. Flashes.”

“But you can’t smell or taste for yourselves,” Pigeon said.

“Not a bit,” Ziggy said.

“It’s no picnic when he uses the restroom,” Victor confided.

“Hey,” Ziggy complained, waving his hands. “We’re trying to eat here!”

Nate had a tough time resisting the urge to laugh. He tried not to make eye contact with Summer, Trevor, or Pigeon; based on their muffled giggles, he figured it would only make him erupt.

Pigeon was the first to recover. “What about touch?” he asked.

“We feel pressure for ourselves,” Victor said, “but pain is like odors. The other guy senses it.”

“If I get injured,” Ziggy said, “my body suffers the damage, but he feels the pain.”

“Takes most of the fun out of punching him,” Victor remarked.

“We can also share certain physical attributes,” Ziggy said. “It’s hard to explain, easier to demonstrate. You’ll catch on.”

“We digress,” Victor said, taking a bite from a sparerib drenched in barbecue sauce. “The main event is being neglected.”

“Sorry,” Ziggy said. “Let’s take care of business. We’ll talk after.”

Both men plowed into their food, making the meat promptly disappear. They didn’t eat messily, but they didn’t waste much time, either. Skewers and bones were piled neatly. Nate wasn’t halfway through his fries before Victor and Ziggy were returning to the food counters.

“Those guys can eat,” Summer said.

“I feel bad for the owner,” Trevor said. “I have a feeling the Battiatos usually get more than they pay for at places like this.”

The brothers came back loaded up with Chinese food, including stir fry, pot stickers, egg rolls, and orange chicken. “Not much seafood,” Victor commented

as they sat. “Too bad.”

“I saw some decent Italian,” Ziggy replied, switching plates with his brother.

“You don’t want the Italian in a joint like this,” Victor scolded.

“I’ll do meatballs and lasagna anywhere,” Ziggy replied.

They attacked their food vigorously. When the plates were empty, they stared at each other. “Feeling warmed up?” Victor asked.

“Chicken-fried steak?” Ziggy asked.

“You read my mind,” Victor responded.

Having finished all the fries he wanted, Nate got up to hunt for other food. By the time he returned, Ziggy and Victor were already back in their seats and efficiently devouring more grub with no sign of slowing. Ziggy rose so Nate could scoot in.

The Battiatos finished their sixth plates before Nate completed his meal. Their later plates were less similar as each man pursued his preferences. Nate had to push to finish his last sparerib. After the fries and a crowded meal plate, he was getting pretty full.

Ziggy patted him on the back. “You already feeling it?”

Nate nodded.

“You’re not sweating yet,” Ziggy said. “You’ve got to go until the food sweat hits. That’s how you know you did it right.”

“Who wants dessert?” Victor asked, rising.

“Me,” Pigeon said, scooting out of the booth.

“Know what you want?” Victor asked, placing a large hand on Pigeon’s shoulder.

Pigeon shrugged. “Not yet.”

Victor gave a nod. “When in doubt, follow the big guy. He’ll lead you to the good stuff.”

Nate went to find some dessert as well. In the end he settled on a slice of chocolate mousse pie and a lemon meringue tart. Victor and Ziggy returned to the table with abundant treats. Victor went heavy on sponge cake smothered in vanilla custard, while Ziggy had constructed a towering hot fudge sundae.

“Should we talk about why we’re here?” Nate asked, taking a bite of pie.

Victor held up a spoon. “All in due time. I prefer not to divide my attention.”

After Nate finished his desserts, he felt ready to burst. He probably should have left some of the lemon tart on the plate, but it had tasted too delicious to stop. Pigeon looked equally overfed, his posture awkward, a smudge of pudding at the corner of his mouth. Summer pointed out the pudding and he wiped it off.

Ziggy and Victor appeared satisfied. Both men had finished their plates first, then sat watching the kids in contented silence.

“Is everyone full?” Ziggy asked.

“I couldn’t eat another bite,” Trevor said.

“Thanks for lunch,” Summer added.

“Our pleasure,” Victor said.

“So, who took John?” Nate asked.

“We have the same question,” Victor replied.

“What do you know?” Pigeon asked.

“Our suspicions center on Arcadeland,” Ziggy said.

“The new arcade in Walnut Hills?” Trevor asked.

“Have you been there?” Victor wondered.

“Not yet,” Trevor said. “It only opened last month. It’s supposed to be awesome.”

“It’s certainly eye catching,” Victor said. “We’re not dealing with amateurs. Arcadeland was at the heart of John’s investigation. We haven’t figured out who owns it, but the arcade is almost certainly a magician’s lair.”

“Which means we can’t enter,” Ziggy added. “Not unless we want a fight. Anybody who has been magically altered would trip a number of alarms. And nobody wants to confront a magician in his lair, especially going in blind.”

“Is this why you need us?” Trevor asked.

Victor gave a nod. “We need information. Eyes on the inside. The arcade isn’t safe, but during the normal hours of operation it shouldn’t pose serious danger to the average customer, especially if you keep your guard up.”

“We need to learn what’s going on,” Ziggy said. “We’re not even sure what kind of racket they’re running. Ideally we’d like to identify the owner.”

“Would I trip the magical alarms?” Nate wondered. “Magic aged me prematurely.”

“Only if you were still an old man,” Victor replied. “Now that you have been restored to your original state, you should read the same as any ordinary kid.”

“What about Lindy?” Pigeon asked. “Do you know about her?”

“We know her story,” Victor acknowledged. “She is definitely in an altered state and would surely trip magical warning signals. Whoever founded this arcade is not one of the good guys. Letting the mystery magician learn Lindy’s secret could be dangerous for her.”

“Dangerous for all of us,” Nate clarified. “If she somehow got her memory back, Belinda would become a major threat. I saw a possible future where she was taking over the town, and that was just the first step of a bigger plan.”

“You have to keep Lindy away from Arcadeland,” Ziggy agreed. “I expect that Stott understands this.”

“He wouldn’t even let Lindy come here today,” Pigeon said.

Victor nodded as if this were expected. “You four need to help reinforce his efforts to keep her out of Walnut Hills.”

“Can we bring magical candy into the arcade?” Nate asked.

“You can and you should,” Victor said. “I don’t expect this venture to be overly dangerous, but if things go wrong, it could get messy fast. You need to be ready to make an escape. Having edible enhancers shouldn’t trigger any alarms. In fact, you should even be able to use them without setting off alarms, since you’ll have been invited into the lair.”

“Invited?” Summer asked.

“The invitation is implied with a public area,” Ziggy said. “Same with the retail portion of the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. The magician gives up some control over the environment upon granting public access.”

“What are we looking for?” Pigeon wondered.

“We have some cheap digital cameras for you,” Victor said. “Take pictures like you’re horsing around, but try to get the employees in the background. Look for unusual games. Talk to any kids who seem like regulars. Keep your ears open. Take note of anything fishy.”

Ziggy pulled out a fat wad of bills and began peeling off twenties. “Play lots of games. We’ll start you out with five hundred dollars. We have plenty more if you need it.”

Nate noticed Trevor gazing at the cash with wide eyes. “All for video games?”

“Whatever games you wish,” Victor said. “Sample a wide variety. Keep an eye out for any oddities.”

“I might enjoy this mission,” Nate said, glancing from Victor to Ziggy.

“Don’t get too excited,” Ziggy said. “Something crooked is going on at Arcadeland. If you have some fun along the way, no problem, but don’t forget the place is a trap. Keep in mind what Belinda White did with her candy shop. Don’t eat anything, and if a game seems to have strange effects, be an observer, not a participant.”

“We’ll be right outside,” Victor promised. “John would have our heads if anything happened to you kids.”

“Deadly lair or not, we’ll be there right away if you need us,” Ziggy assured them. “You in?”

Nate and his friends exchanged small nods. Nate held out his hand for the money. “We’re in.”

Arcadeland



Half a block from Arcadeland, on the opposite side of the street, Summer and Pigeon ducked into an alley. Both of them looked up. The buildings on either side rose three stories tall.

“No fire escapes,” Pigeon said.

“We’ll have to use Moon Rocks,” Summer answered, leading them farther down the alley. She looked back toward the street. Almost two hours had passed since they had left Schwendiman’s All-You-Can-Eat Buffet. The sun was not directly overhead, so most of the alley was in shadow. Anyone in the cars driving by on Canal Street would have only a brief glimpse into the alleyway.

“Acceptable risk?” Pigeon asked.

“Nobody was nearby on the sidewalk,” Summer said. “If we hurry we should be fine.”

Pigeon glanced up. “Several windows.”

Summer indicated a vertical path up the wall. “We’ll be hard to see from a window if we stay along this line. People would practically have to lean out to get a view of us.”

“We do need a good vantage point,” Pigeon conceded.

Summer popped a Moon Rock into her mouth, feeling the familiar lightening of her frame. Pigeon did likewise. Summer jumped toward one side of the alley, soaring gently, then kicked off the side of a building, gaining altitude as she crossed to the far side. She kicked off the wall again, gliding higher.

Glancing down, she saw Pigeon staring up at her. She was already high, but she reminded herself that with the Moon Rock, to fall would be no big deal. Two more sharp kicks and she reached the top of one of the buildings.

Summer eased her light body over the edge to stand on the roof, then watched as Pigeon tried to follow her. He was kicking off the walls too straight-

on, gaining only a little height every time he crossed from one side to the other. She almost called out some advice, then realized it would probably only embarrass him without improving his technique.

After springing back and forth more than fifteen times, Pigeon reached the top of the building. "Should I spit it out?" he asked.

"No point in wasting it," Summer said. "Just be careful not to float off the roof and cause a scene."

"Right."

They gingerly moved to the part of the roof overlooking Canal Street and Arcadeland. The arcade was much larger than Summer had expected. Neon fireworks burst in jerky patterns beside the flashy sign. Not only was the main building huge, but two miniature golf courses wrapped around it. There were batting cages on the near side and a twisty go-kart track on the far side. A tall chain-link fence enclosed the entire complex.

"Looks fun," Pigeon said.

Summer noticed that Pigeon was raising his head higher than necessary as he surveyed Arcadeland, making himself too visible from the street. "Stay low," she cautioned.

"Right."

Summer spotted Nate and Trevor on the far side of the street, trying to look casual as they scanned the rooftops. She lifted her head a little and waved. Nate saw her and gave a small salute. He and Trevor mounted their bikes, then rode over to the Arcadeland parking lot. She watched them deposit their bikes at the large bike rack before disappearing inside the building.

Pigeon shifted beside her. "I keep trying to tell myself they got the dangerous job, not the fun one."

"Are you believing it?"

"Not really."

"Me neither," Summer sighed. "But at least we had an excuse to climb a building. Nate was right that we'd be crazy to all go in together. This way, if something goes wrong, they can't catch us all at once."

"Think anything will happen?"

"Probably not. But better safe than sorry."

Summer studied Arcadeland. It seemed popular. There were cars in the parking lot and plenty of bikes at the bike rack. Two of the batting cages were in use, and several groups roamed the miniature golf courses, putting on artificial turf surrounded by miniature monuments. She saw the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, the Sphinx, Big Ben, Mount Rushmore, and others that she recognized but couldn't name.

Summer leaned toward Pigeon. “What’s the name of that building in Russia with the colorful, onion-shaped domes?”

“In the West we call it St. Basil’s Cathedral,” he replied. “There’s a rumor that the architect who designed it was blinded by Ivan the Terrible to prevent him from duplicating his efforts elsewhere.”

“How do you know all this stuff?”

He shrugged. “I just like to read about history.”

As the minutes dragged by, Summer felt her patience wearing thin. People made their way around the miniature golf courses. A trickle of customers entered and exited the front doors.

Summer tried to spot the Battiato brothers. Supposedly they were close by, but she hadn’t seen them since leaving the buffet. She studied the parked vehicles in the area and scanned up and down the sidewalks, but she detected no sign of the beefy twins.

“What the . . . ?” Pigeon suddenly blurted.

“What?” Summer asked, glancing at him to see where he was looking.

“Do you see those two kids across the way?”

“Which kids?”

“The two near the batting cages, just outside the Arcadeland fence.”

“A boy and a girl.”

“Right.”

“What about them?”

“Well, I barely saw it, but when they came out from behind that building next to Arcadeland, they were like ten feet off the ground. They glided to a landing on the pavement.”

“Like they had Moon Rocks?”

“Or something.”

Summer studied them as best she could. The girl had longish brown hair and tan skin. The boy had messy blond hair. They were looking around as if to make sure they were unobserved. Summer was about to comment that they were acting suspicious when the two kids jumped over the Arcadeland fence with a single smooth leap. The side of the batting cages would have shielded them from onlookers inside Arcadeland. But Summer saw the furtive act perfectly.

“Arcadeland must be handing out magic candy,” Summer guessed.

“What do we do?” Pigeon asked.

“Those two probably know a lot about what’s going on here.”

“Do we go down there?”

Summer frowned. “We need information if we’re going to help John. We shouldn’t risk letting them get away without finding out more about them.”

Pigeon gave a nod. "Then we better hurry."

Nate paused beside Trevor after entering Arcadeland. He had never been inside such a vast arcade before. Beyond the tiled lobby he could see traditional standing video games, driving games, shooting games, plus diverse games where a player could win tickets.

"This place is big," Trevor murmured.

"Let's check it out," Nate said.

For the first few minutes, Nate and Trevor roamed the aisles of games, surveying the different ways to spend tokens. Some of the shooting games looked really cool. One let two players hunt dinosaurs together. Another offered the chance to roam a zombie-infested mansion armed with machine guns. A third turned the player into the gunner atop an armored vehicle that prowled around a battlefield.

Trevor seemed extra interested in the racing games. You could ride a motorcycle that you turned by rocking it from side to side. A long row of car racing games used steering wheels to put the player in the driver's seat. Most featured exotic courses. Some of them were apparently set in the future. One unusual racing game allowed the player to pedal a bike that powered a one-man airship.

Nate didn't spend a lot of time on the traditional video games. There were some slick fighting games, and a few classic games like Gauntlet, Donkey Kong, and Pac-Man. But he could play games like that at home.

Most of the arcade was devoted to games that allowed the player to win tickets. Nate found Skee-Ball, basketball, and Whac-A-Mole. Some of the games seemed like pure chance, where you spun a big prize wheel or pressed a button to drop a ball onto a spinning platform riddled with holes.

On one side of the arcade they found a coin-operated shooting gallery depicting a scene from the Old West, with lots of little targets spaced around the area. They paused to watch people shooting. One target made the mannequin at the piano start playing. Another made the spittoon rattle. A third made an owl flap its wings and spin its head around.

"Let's get some tokens," Trevor suggested.

Nate led the way to a token machine. He inserted a twenty, and coins came clinking out like he'd won a jackpot. "Is this enough for now?" Nate asked.

"Do one more for me," Trevor said. "They want us to be thorough—that'll take some money."

Nate fed the machine a second twenty and let Trevor collect the tokens. While Trevor scooped them out, Nate scanned the room. There were people

around, but the arcade wasn't packed. He supposed it probably got more crowded in the evenings and on weekends.

"Where do you want to start?" Trevor asked.

"Too many choices—it's hard to pick."

"Do you want to win tickets?"

"I don't know," Nate said. "Let's see what prizes they have."

They wandered over to the redemption counter, where various items were on display alongside the quantity of tickets required to claim them. The prizes ranged from cheap little army men and gummy bracelets for 5 tickets up to sound systems and guitars for 15,000.

"This is such a rip-off," Trevor said. "The cheap things are junk, and you could buy the cool stuff for so much less than it would cost to earn all those tickets."

"Earning the tickets is supposed to be fun," Nate said. "I think they have the prizes as sort of a bonus."

Trevor folded his arms and leaned against the glass counter. "I don't know. If I put in all the effort to win 10,000 tickets, I'd want something better than a neon clock."

"You could get two mini foosball tables," Nate pointed out.

"Exactly," Trevor said. "How long do you think that mini foosball table would stay fun?"

"You can be like me, and just go for the bouncy balls. Let's see . . . the little ones are 25 tickets, medium are 50, and the bigger ones are 100. Cheap *and* fun."

"If you say so."

"You're welcome to give your tickets to me," Nate said.

"I could probably find a prize if I had to," Trevor hedged. "Maybe that glow-in-the-dark yo-yo."

"Hours of fun," Nate said. "Want to shoot some hoops?"

"We can shoot hoops for free," Trevor mentioned. "At the park. At our school."

"Right, but on a normal court it isn't timed, the balls don't automatically keep coming, nothing keeps score, and you don't get tickets at the end. Besides, we're not really paying for it."

"Okay, I'm in."

They walked over to the row of basketball shooting games against the wall. Most had mini basketballs. A couple at the end were larger, with full-sized balls and a longer distance to the hoop.

Only one person was currently playing—a skinny kid with dark hair who

looked to be about their age. He was on one of the smaller machines. As the timer ticked down, he sank one ball after another, most of them swishes. After releasing each shot, he snatched another ball before the previous one had dropped. Taking no time to aim, he kept shooting with mechanical regularity. The infrequent missed shots didn't rattle him, although occasionally an inbound shot would collide with a ball still bouncing on the rim.

For the last thirty seconds, the hoop slid farther away, awarding three points instead of two for each basket made. After the hoop retreated, the kid missed only twice even though he was still shooting about as fast as Nate could imagine. At the buzzer, his score was 105. The machine started expelling a long ribbon of tickets, which joined other strips of tickets coiled at his feet.

"That was amazing," Nate said loudly.

The kid looked over. "I've been practicing."

"Can you shoot like that every time?" Trevor asked.

The kid shrugged. "Mostly. You guys want to have a competition?"

Nate didn't feel very eager. He doubted he could sink half as many baskets in the same amount of time. "What sort of competition?"

The kid smiled. "Whoever sinks the most baskets keeps all the tickets." He looked down at the tangled ribbons of tickets by his feet.

"We don't have any tickets," Trevor said. "We might only earn a few."

"Then you don't have much to lose," the kid replied.

"Sure," Nate said, taking out a token.

Trevor claimed a machine on one side of the kid, Nate on the other. Nate and Trevor inserted their tokens. The kid swiped what looked like a credit card through a card reader above the token slot.

"What's that?" Nate asked.

The kid held up the card. "If you're going to play a lot, you can buy a card from the counter and use it instead of tokens."

"Seems easier."

"It is. You guys ready?"

"Ready," Trevor said.

Nate punched the start button. Basketballs rolled his way. The hoop wasn't too far away, but he missed his first shot. The second shot clanged off the rim. The third went in. He tried not to notice the kid beside him shooting balls twice as fast and hardly missing. Nate kept shooting, missing plenty.

Just as Nate started sinking shots with regularity, the hoop slid back for the three-point finale. Nate made only one shot at that distance. His final score was 27. The machine rewarded him by spitting out three tickets.

Nate looked over to see that Trevor had scored 33. The other kid had tallied

101. His machine was gushing tickets again.

“How many tickets are coming out?” Nate asked.

“You get fifty for breaking a hundred,” the kid replied. “The record today is at 114. I put it there. If you break that, the jackpot is 300. They reset the record to 80 every morning.”

“How many tickets do you have?” Nate asked.

“Right now, around eleven hundred. Plus your three. And his four.”

Nate tore off his three tickets and handed them over. “Why so many tickets?” he asked. “What are you saving up for?”

The kid suddenly looked a little shifty. “I don’t know. One of the big prizes, I guess.”

“Like what?” Trevor wondered. “The guitar?”

“Something like that,” the kid replied vaguely. “You guys want to try me again?”

“Why risk all your tickets?” Nate asked.

The kid shrugged. “It isn’t much of a risk, and I get a few extra. Plus I get bored shooting alone.”

“I’ll try again,” Nate said.

“Sure,” Trevor agreed.

Nate shot faster this time. He felt like he had a better feel for it. By the end he had scored 36. Trevor scored 41. The kid had 108.

Nate tore off his four tickets and handed them over.

“You’re not letting him steal your tickets?” asked a voice from behind.

Nate turned. A kid in a Giants cap stood beside a girl with dark hair. They looked about his age. Maybe a little older.

“I knew I’d probably lose,” Nate explained.

The hat kid laughed. “Definitely, not probably. Nobody beats Roman.”

Nate looked over. “Is that your name? I’m Nate.”

“Trevor,” Trevor added from the other side.

Roman nodded at them.

“How many are you up to?” the hat kid asked Roman.

“Low forties,” he replied.

“Low forties?” Trevor asked. “You have over a thousand tickets.”

“He means more than forty thousand,” the girl said.

“Forty *thousand*?” Nate exclaimed. “Are you compulsive or something? Like one of those gamblers who can’t quit?”

After glaring at the girl, the hat kid turned to Nate. “He’s not addicted. He’s just really good. Something you wouldn’t know about.”

“How good are you?” Nate shot back, feeling insulted. “You on the arcade

basketball pro tour?”

“I’m better than you,” the hat kid replied. “Look, you should get lost, we need to talk to Roman.”

Nate knew he should be focused on reconnaissance, but the rudeness was too blatant to ignore. “How about you beat me at basketball first? One game. You on one side, Roman on the other.”

The hat kid chuckled. “I don’t need four tickets.”

“I have more than nineteen dollars in tokens. Whoever wins gets them along with my tickets. If I win, I get Roman’s tickets and whatever you can offer.”

The hat kid glanced at Roman, who shrugged.

“Okay,” the hat kid said. He produced a card like the one Roman was using. “There’s more than a hundred dollars in tokens on here. You beat me, you keep it. If Roman beats me, I’ll buy him lunch.”

“Deal,” Nate said, pulling out a stick of Peak Performance gum and putting it in his mouth.

“You in too?” the hat kid asked Trevor.

Trevor raised both hands. “I’ll just watch.”

The hat kid walked to the game beside Nate and swiped his card.

“What’s your name?” Nate asked.

“Chris,” he said, “but you can call me daddy.”

“We’ll see,” Nate said, inserting a token.

“You guys ready?” Roman asked.

They all hit their start buttons.

Nate grabbed his first ball. The hoop looked enormous, and incredibly close. He began shooting rapidly, never bobbling when he grabbed a new ball, never waiting for the previous shot to drop before grabbing another. He realized he could do it faster if he alternated shots between his left and right hand, but decided that his unending string of swishes was conspicuous enough.

As the hoop retracted to the three-point distance, Nate kept making shots while it was in motion. He continued to drain one after another for three points each. When the buzzer sounded, he had not missed a single shot. He hadn’t even touched the rim. Chris had scored 92. Roman had earned 109. Nate had 140.

A siren went off as tickets unspooled from all three basketball machines. After the tickets stopped for Chris and Roman, Nate’s kept coming.

“I don’t believe it,” Roman said in awe. “Were you scamming me?”

“How’d you do that?” Chris accused.

“Didn’t seem hard, daddy,” Nate said, suppressing a smile. “The hoop is close. How’d you miss so many?”

Chris scowled.

“I’m not sure ‘daddy’ suits you,” Nate went on. “Maybe granddaddy?”

“What’s your best all-time score?” Chris asked Roman.

“A hundred and seventeen. Yours?”

“One-ten. How’d this joker shoot 140?”

“Maybe grandmommy?” Nate tried.

“I was watching,” the girl said. “He was really fast, and he never missed. Not once.”

“Let me see your hand,” Chris said, stepping close and grabbing Nate by the wrist. He apparently didn’t find what he was looking for, so he checked the other hand. Nate didn’t resist the inspection.

“Anything?” the girl asked.

“Nothing,” Chris replied, peering at Nate intently. “Where are you from, Nate?”

Nate grinned. “My dad owns the company that makes these.”

“Really?” Roman asked.

“No,” Nate said. “I was just in the zone at the right time. I live over in Colson.”

The tickets had stopped unreeling.

Nate glanced down. “How many tickets were supposed to pay out for breaking the record?”

“Three hundred,” Roman said.

“It stopped around 230,” Nate said. He hadn’t been paying direct attention, but his instincts told him he was right. He had learned to trust his instincts while chewing Peak Performance.

“They’ll refill it,” Chris said. “Risa, see if you can find Todd.”

“Yes, master,” the girl replied, rolling her eyes.

“Are you guys going to pay up?” Trevor asked.

Chris looked reluctant, his lips pressed together. “That’s only fair, I guess. You might have been conning us, Nate, but you definitely won.” Chris handed over his token card.

“Bad luck for me,” Roman said. “My tickets are yours. More than a thousand. That was incredible.”

Glancing off to one side, Nate saw Summer and Pigeon approaching. They walked up to Trevor. Pigeon seemed to pay abnormal attention to Chris.

“Hey, guys,” Summer said brightly. “What are you up to?”

“Scamming us out of buckets of tokens,” Chris said. “Tell you what, Nate, how about you give me a chance to win my card back, double or nothing. We use the bigger machines with the full-sized balls. I like those better. If I lose, I’ll

give you a card with exactly \$100 in tokens on it.”

“What are you, a millionaire?” Nate asked.

“I made some pretty good money recently,” Chris replied. “What do you say?”

“My shooting wasn’t a fluke,” Nate said.

“One-forty can’t be a fluke,” Chris acknowledged. “It’s too high. It’s ridiculous. Still, give me a chance to win my card back on the bigger machines. I want to try.”

Nate knew the Peak Performance gum would last at least another ten minutes. “Sure, why not?”

Risa returned with a man who was presumably Todd. In his thirties, he wore black jeans and a dark T-shirt promoting a band Nate had never heard of. He had a wiry build and smelled faintly of cheese puffs. His green hair was styled into a faux hawk. One forearm sported a tattoo of a dark angel holding a pair of swords rendered in blue, purple, and black. Under his other arm he clutched a large wheel of tickets.

“Whoa!” Todd said. “A hundred and forty? Nobody has put up a score like that since we opened.” He focused on Nate, who still stood in front of the machine. “You did this?”

“I was in the zone,” Nate said simply.

“You should be in the newspaper,” Todd said. “That is just a killer score. You should see if there’s a pro league for these things. Seriously, you’d be a superstar.”

“I don’t know about that,” Nate replied, hoping he wasn’t blushing. He felt a little guilty since his performance was due to magic gum rather than his own skill.

“I hear it didn’t pay out all 300,” Todd said.

“Yeah,” Nate replied. “I think it stopped short.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Todd said, crouching in front of the machine. Using some sort of key, he opened it up. “Yep, empty as my girlfriend’s head.”

“How’s it going, Todd?” Chris asked.

“Good, Chris,” Todd replied. He loaded the wheel of tickets into the machine and closed it. More tickets began streaming out. “Did this guy take you to school?”

“He destroyed us,” Chris said.

“I was wondering when somebody would toast one of you,” Todd said. “Goes to show you, can’t get too cocky. There’s always somebody better.” Placing his hands on his hips, Todd stared at the score. “One-forty. They should pay out a thousand for a score like that. Party on.”

Todd strolled away.

Chris nodded toward the bigger machines.

“We’re just playing for you to get your card back,” Nate clarified. “I keep these tickets.”

“It’s Roman who cares about tickets,” Chris said. “But there’s only two of the big machines. Just you and me, playing for cards.”

“I’ll gather your tickets, Nate,” Trevor offered.

“We’ll help,” Summer said, giving Nate a funny look. He wasn’t sure how to read her expression. Did she think it was wrong for him to scam Chris again using Peak Performance?

Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon had been engaged in a huddled conversation while Todd resupplied the ticket dispenser. Nate wondered what had lured Summer and Pigeon out of hiding. There didn’t seem to be any emergency.

Nate went and stood next to Chris. These bigger machines required two tokens. Nate pushed them in, Chris swiped his card, they hit the start buttons, and Nate started shooting. The balls were bigger, the hoop farther away, but it seemed just as easy as the other game. Working quickly, Nate hit swish after swish, the ball touching nothing but net. Hoping to avoid looking supernatural, he forced himself to miss three shots. When the buzzer sounded, he had beaten Chris by almost fifty points.

“Another new record,” Chris said, glancing from the scoreboard to Nate. He looked stunned and frustrated. “I practice a lot, and I shot fairly well just now. You scored way higher than I’ve ever shot. I guess I owe you another card.”

“It’s okay,” Nate said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“No, Nate, I can afford it,” Chris said. “I asked for a rematch, and you owned me. How many times did he miss?”

“Three,” Risa said. “He was shooting fast.”

“These pay 500 when you break the record,” Chris said. “You’re well on your way.”

“To what?” Nate asked.

Chris studied him curiously. “You’re an interesting guy.” He bent over and tore off the ribbon of tickets dangling from his machine. “My tickets weren’t part of the deal. I’ll donate them to Roman.” He handed the tickets to his friend. “I’ll be right back.”

Tickets continued to flow from Nate’s basketball game. “How do I manage all of these tickets?” Nate asked Roman.

“You feed them into machines that count them,” Roman said. “They print out a receipt. Or the ticket counters can store them on a card.”

“You really have over forty thousand?” Nate asked.

“Pretty much,” Roman said, avoiding eye contact. “I may have slipped back to just under forty.”

Was he hiding something? “Do any of the prizes cost that much?” Nate wondered.

“Not many,” Roman said. “I mostly earn the tickets for fun.”

“I can’t believe you shot like that twice in a row,” Risa said to Nate. “Can you do it every time?”

“Depends,” Nate said. “On a good day I could probably keep repeating. It’s weird. I’m either really coordinated or pretty average. Not a lot of middle ground.”

“But you were messing with me when we first played,” Roman said. “Setting us up.”

“Maybe a little,” Nate replied.

Chris came back and handed Nate a card. “You earned it. And no offense, but I’m never playing basketball against you again. Roman, we should talk.”

“Later,” Roman said to Nate.

Nate nodded at him, feeling a little bad for taking his tickets.

Chris, Roman, and Risa walked away together.

Summer, Pigeon, and Trevor approached carrying a bunch of tickets. Trevor and Summer had theirs bundled neatly. Pigeon’s were in tangled disarray, with several loose ribbons dragging.

“You just met some very interesting people,” Summer said. “We need to talk.”

Tickets



Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon found an empty room clearly used for private parties. A pair of long, orange tables with adjacent benches filled much of the space. A discarded cake box sat on a counter, full of crumpled napkins and plastic cups. Small, colorful shapes flecked the white wallpaper, giving the impression of confetti.

Trevor closed the door, and they gathered at the end of one of the tables, two on each side. They knelt on the benches and hunched over the table so they could keep their heads together and talk low.

“What’s the story?” Nate asked.

“That guy you beat both times at basketball,” Summer began.

“Chris,” Nate supplied.

“He can jump like he’s sucking on Moon Rocks. Same with the girl.”

“Risa,” Trevor offered.

“We saw them arrive,” Pigeon said. “They came into Arcadeland by jumping the fence when they thought nobody was looking. And I mean jumping it. One leap.”

“We came to warn you,” Summer said. “We thought they would be good people to watch.”

“We figure they must be getting magic candy from here,” Pigeon said.

“Chris was acting strange,” Nate said. “Like he had a secret. Or like he suspected I had one. He was tough to read.”

“He and Roman were awesome at basketball,” Trevor said. “They’ve definitely had some practice.”

Nate met eyes with Trevor. “Chris and Risa seemed to be helping Roman. They were wondering how many tickets he had earned.”

“You think they use tickets to buy magic candy?” Trevor asked.

“We know something out of the ordinary is going on here,” Nate said.

“The tickets sound like a good place to start,” Pigeon said.

“Roman has almost forty thousand tickets,” Nate said. “And he’s still working hard to earn more. Should we go see if any prizes are worth that much?”

The others agreed. Nate led the way over to the redemption counter, where Todd was accepting tickets from a couple of young girls in exchange for plastic rings.

“That longboard is 10,000,” Summer reported.

“The little jukebox is 20,000,” Pigeon said, eyes roving the shelves. “I don’t see anything for more than that.”

“Hey, Todd?” Nate asked.

“Yeah?” he answered.

“What prize costs the most tickets?”

Todd winced as if thinking and rubbed the tattoo on his forearm. He eyed the shelves. “Jukebox is one of the highest ticket items. Works fairly well. I’m sort of an audiophile, and it sounds decent.”

“Is it the highest?” Nate pursued.

Leaning one hand on the glass counter that held all the cheaper items, Todd gave Nate a measuring stare. Then he glanced down at the cabinet. “There are some pretty expensive stamps toward the back.”

Nate crouched and examined the contents of the glass counter. Looking past the finger puppets, the suckers, the army men, the spider rings, the tiny bouncy balls, and the other items marked at 50 tickets or less, Nate saw two small signs proclaiming a value of 40,000, and a second pair marked 50,000. Behind the signs were four inkpads—one with a simple image of a submarine stenciled on the cover, one with a racecar, one with a fighter jet, and one with a tank. Beside each inkpad rested a stamp.

“Fifty thousand?” Nate asked.

Todd nodded. “We don’t generally draw attention to them. Most people who notice think they’re mismarked.”

“Inkpads?” Summer asked. “Like for stamps?”

“The pads aren’t for sale,” Todd explained. “Just the stamps. Forty thousand for the sub or the racecar. Fifty thousand for the tank or the jet.”

“For 50,000 tickets I get to stamp a tank on my hand?” Trevor deadpanned.

“More than once,” Todd replied. “It could potentially amount to a lifetime supply. But only four people get to win each stamp.”

“Are all the stamps available?” Nate asked.

Todd shook his head slightly. “Two of the jet slots are gone. One tank slot is gone. No racecar slots are taken yet. One sub slot is gone. I happen to know

there are plenty of people currently working to win the empty slots.”

“Why?” Pigeon asked.

“I’m not allowed to fully explain,” Todd said. “Earning the stamp is sort of like getting into a club. The details are only for those who succeed. Are you guys here to redeem any of those tickets?”

Nate realized that they were all holding a lot of tickets. “No, later. We were just weighing our options.”

Todd looked at Nate. “Keep shooting baskets how you were, and you’ll be able to afford anything on display.” He drummed his hands on the counter. “Have fun. I need to check on some things in the back.”

Nate and his friends walked away.

“Should we get a receipt for all of these tickets?” Summer asked.

“Beats carrying them around,” Trevor said.

It took some time to feed all the ribbons of tickets into the machines. In the end they got a receipt for over two thousand.

“That’s a lot of bouncy balls,” Trevor said.

“I might be aiming higher than bouncy balls,” Nate replied. “Let’s get out of here. We need to talk in private.”

Their favorite location for secret Blue Falcon meetings was the Nest, a secluded hollow enclosed by trees and shrubs at the creek below Monroe Circle, the street where Nate, Trevor, and Pigeon lived. They were pedaling in that direction when a white van pulled over to the side of the road ahead of them. Ziggy got out and helped them load their bikes inside.

“Why do I feel like I’m being kidnapped?” Trevor asked.

“Because a pair of large men we’ve hardly met just piled us into their nondescript vehicle,” Pigeon replied.

The roomy van had space for the bikes behind the two rows of benches where the kids sat. Victor was driving while Ziggy rode shotgun.

“Where are we going?” Nate asked.

“Nowhere definite,” Victor replied. “We’ll just drive and talk. We want to go over everything while it’s fresh in your minds.”

“Did you snap any pictures?” Ziggy asked.

“I forgot,” Trevor said.

“I snuck a few,” Pigeon said. “I didn’t aim the shots, but I got one of the employees, along with some interesting customers.”

Pigeon held up a digital camera, an image of Todd on the screen. Ziggy accepted the camera and studied the picture.

“I don’t know this clown,” he said. “Might just be an ordinary deadbeat.”

Ziggy started paging through other images. Pigeon leaned forward to narrate.

“That’s Chris,” Pigeon said. “He’s one of the kids we think might be involved with the secret side of Arcadeland. Summer and I saw him float over a fence. He didn’t have a hat on at the time.”

“They’re already recruiting?” Victor asked.

“Seems that way,” Nate said. “You can earn stamps for forty or fifty thousand tickets. It’s a lifetime supply. The stamps are by far the most expensive prizes, and they’re kind of hidden. After I used Peak Performance to enhance my basketball score, Chris checked my hand. I bet he was looking for a stamp. I think the stamp gives access to whatever these guys are handing out.”

“You mentioned different prices,” Ziggy said. “Are there different stamps?”

Summer explained about the four different stamps, and how each stamp was limited to four people. She told how some slots were already gone.

“That girl, Risa, was also floating,” Pigeon narrated as Ziggy looked at a new image. “And that guy is named Roman.”

“He’ll probably be a new recruit soon,” Trevor said. “The other two were encouraging him to win tickets.”

“Seems evident that trading tickets for stamps gets kids into the inner circle,” Victor said.

“Do you want us to earn a stamp?” Nate asked.

Victor pulled the van into the parking lot of a large home improvement store and claimed a spot far from the entrance. Empty parking spaces surrounded them. He turned to look Nate in the eye. “If you kids acquire those stamps, you’ll expose yourselves to some serious danger. I can’t guarantee that we could protect you.”

“Do you have enough information now to help John?” Pigeon asked.

“We’ve found the start of a trail,” Ziggy said. “Victor and I can’t go in there and trade tickets for stamps, but we can track down the kids Pigeon photographed and look into this Todd character.”

“What if we go after the stamps?” Summer asked. “Could it make a difference?”

Victor and Ziggy shared a glance. “You want the truth?” Victor asked. “It would move the investigation forward much faster. The people running this operation have been extremely careful not to expose themselves. Those stamps probably lead straight to whoever is behind all of this.”

“But the information would come at a price,” Ziggy said.

“The magician behind this operation is clearly powerful and secretive,” Victor said. “If you become involved directly, it might not be easy to walk away.”

“We could get sucked into some serious danger,” Nate said.

“At best it will be dangerous,” Ziggy said. “At worst you could get killed.”

“Do we know whether John is alive?” Pigeon asked in a small voice.

“We’re not certain,” Ziggy replied. “We hope so.”

“If you’re considering direct involvement,” Victor said, “you deserve to know all we do. This situation is bigger than John Dart going missing. John learned something and called in Mozag.”

“Your boss,” Trevor said.

“Arguably the most powerful living magician,” Ziggy said. “He almost never gets involved directly in an investigation. He’s too valuable. He runs things from a distance.”

“But he came when John called,” Victor said. “And Mozag disappeared along with him.”

“Mozag is missing too?” Nate exclaimed.

“Which tells us a lot,” Victor said. “Away from his permanent lair, Mozag was vulnerable, but still, any magician who can subdue Mozag is wielding some serious power. And any situation that would lure Mozag into the field had to have catastrophic potential.”

“Then we could be in danger whether we help or not,” Nate summarized. “If we do nothing, whoever is running Arcadeland could still become a threat to us.”

“The country could be in danger,” Ziggy said. “Maybe the world.”

“Mozag didn’t get involved directly with Mrs. White,” Victor pointed out. “But he came for this.”

“He and John were captured at the same time?” Trevor asked.

“Far as we know,” Ziggy said.

“Does Mozag have other agents who can help?” Pigeon wondered. “Are you guys here alone?”

“There are some others who could lend assistance,” Victor said. “Frankly, with John out of play, we were the best operatives available. This is a delicate situation. The knowledge that Mozag polices the magical community keeps a lot of shady characters in check.”

“You don’t want it known that he’s missing,” Nate said.

Ziggy raised his eyebrows. “All we need is for every crooked magician with a scheme and a few lackeys to find out that right now is the best opportunity in decades to risk some mischief. One major crisis is bad enough.”

“We want to help,” Summer said.

Victor sighed. “Bottom line? You’re kids. I don’t want to put on the heavy pressure. We could use your assistance, but we don’t require it. You now know

the situation. Take some time to think it through. Talk things over with Sebastian Stott. We'll back whatever choice you make."

"Mozag saved me from being trapped as an old man," Nate said. "John saved me too. They both spend their lives protecting us all from maniacs with magical powers. I have to help them. I'll win one of those stamps. I'll find out what's going on."

"Shouldn't we talk to Mr. Stott first?" Pigeon asked.

"We should," Nate said. "We could use whatever support he can offer. But whatever we decide to do, it won't hurt to start winning some tickets."

"You mean tonight?" Summer asked.

"I mean right now."

Nate returned to Arcadeland with Trevor and Summer. Pigeon had left to go talk things over with Mr. Stott. It was later in the afternoon, and the arcade was more crowded. Ziggy and Victor waited outside in the van as backup.

Scanning the room, Nate spotted Roman over at the shooting gallery, hunched over the counter with his cheek against a rifle. Nate crossed to him. Summer and Trevor followed but hung back.

"Do you ever go home?" Nate asked.

"You're here too," Roman replied, one eye shut as he prepared to shoot.

"Sick of basketball?"

"Some hotshot made the record unreachable today," Roman replied. "And yes, I eventually get sick of it. Basketball is probably where I can average the most tickets per turn, but it gets old after I play it for too long."

"How are the tickets for this game?" Nate asked.

Roman stopped aiming and looked up. "Not bad if you know the tricks."

"What tricks?"

Roman hesitated for a moment. "Most people aim at the close stuff. They want to see the guy play the piano. They want to make the cow skull shake. They want the bottles behind the bar to spin. But the saloon has two windows."

"Right," Nate said. Outside one window four buzzards were circling in and out of view, each with a tiny target attached. A small train went by the other window, as if in the distance, an engine pulling four cars. Each train car had a target. The train moved fairly quickly, coming into view every fifteen seconds.

"The vultures don't do much when you hit them. You just hear a faint squawk and the target lights up. The train does even less. The target lights up. That's it. You get ten shots each turn. If you hit all four vultures on your turn, you get 25 tickets. If you hit all four train cars, you also earn 25. Those targets aren't easy to hit, but if you get good, you can pick up 50 tickets per turn without

much trouble. Using any other strategy, you're lucky to get 10."

"Thanks for the tips."

Roman glanced back at Trevor and Summer. "I haven't seen you guys around before today. You plan to hang out here much?"

"I like it here," Nate said. "It's the best arcade I've seen. I want one of those stamps."

"Stamps?" Roman asked, trying much too hard to sound casual.

"Aren't you after a stamp?"

"Why would I want a stamp?"

Nate shrugged. "They're the most expensive prizes, and you keep working hard to earn more tickets even though you have a ton."

Roman shook his head. "Chris and Risa are getting sloppy. They were so careful not to let anything slip before they had theirs."

"Which one are you after?" Nate asked. "Jet, tank, racecar, or sub?"

"Which do you want?"

"I'm not sure," Nate replied honestly. "That's why I'm bugging you."

Roman seemed like he wanted to end the conversation. "I want a jet. My friends have jets, so I want one."

"What's the big deal?" Nate pursued. "Why work so hard for the stamps?"

"I don't know," Roman replied, glancing around to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. "Chris and Risa aren't allowed to tell me. They just assure me it's amazing. It better be. I've blown all my money on tickets."

"Only two jet slots left, right?" Nate asked.

"I've gotten good at earning tickets," Roman said. "I should have enough for one of them by tomorrow."

"Are other kids after stamps?" Nate wondered.

"People are catching on," Roman said. "You better hurry if you want one. The way you shoot a basketball, you could probably get there if you try."

"You want the third jet stamp," Nate said. "Is anybody after the fourth?"

"Nobody we care about," Roman said. He glanced at Trevor and Summer. "Just don't try to take both slots ahead of me. Chris and Risa would hate you for it, and so would I."

"We don't want to beat you," Nate said. "Besides, you're too far along. We couldn't catch up even if we went nonstop. But my friends might go after other stamps. Who knows?"

"Hold on a second," Roman said. "You're wrecking my concentration. Let me finish up."

"Go ahead."

Nate watched as Roman lit up the buzzards and the train cars.

“The vultures are tricky,” Roman said. “You have to pay attention to the differences, make sure you hit one of each. Hitting the same one four times doesn’t do it.”

His last shot was at the train. Nothing lit up.

“You missed?” Nate asked.

“I’d already hit everything with the first nine,” Roman explained. He paused as if debating whether to say more. “Look, other people helped me, so I’ll help you. There are two bonus shots that are almost impossible. They aren’t marked. One is through the window of the engine. It’s worth a hundred tickets. I know it exists, because I’ve hit it twice. The other is a tiny star that shines behind the vultures for barely a second every two minutes. I’ve never hit it, but I saw Risa do it. You can only hit it while it’s lit. Supposedly if you hit all eight far targets plus the two bonus shots on a single turn, you get some kind of mega bonus.”

“Has anyone done it?” Nate asked.

“Nope.”

“Then how do you know it’s possible?” Nate asked.

“Chris found out somehow after he got his stamp,” Roman said. “He was the first person to earn one.”

Nate glanced over his shoulder, taking in the assortment of games spaced around the floor. “What game gives the biggest payout?”

“Shooting Stars,” Roman answered. “But playing is like buying a lottery ticket. The lights all move around in crazy patterns, and you have to get the ten red ones to line up in the middle by freezing them at the perfect time. They move too fast to win with skill. People get tickets off of it, but you’ll average more on games like basketball where skill makes a bigger difference. A lot of those redemption games are basically gambling for kids.”

“Redemption games?”

“The kind that pay out redeemable tickets. Arcade lingo. Look, I better get going.”

“You’re not sticking around?” Nate asked.

Roman shook his head. “I’ll come back in the morning when the high scores are reset. My parents don’t want me here, so I shouldn’t hang around all day. I have to be sneaky, make up excuses for where I’ve been. By the way, if you come in the morning, raise the records slowly. If you set the basketball record too high on the first try, we’ll all earn fewer tickets for the rest of the day. Beat the records little by little and you cash in more.”

“You have this down to a science.”

Roman chuckled. “It has sort of been my summer job.”

“A summer job where you lose all your money.”

Roman snorted. “Exactly. That stamp better be cool. Later.”

He gathered his tickets and left.

Summer walked up to Nate. “Good info. We could overhear most of it. I didn’t want to interrupt. He seemed willing to talk to you.”

“I’m not sure how to read him,” Nate said. “He isn’t super friendly, but he’s been pretty helpful.”

Trevor clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “If we’re here for tickets, we should get started.”

“Should we use the gum?” Summer asked.

They had each set out that morning with two sticks of Peak Performance gum. Nate had used one of his, but Pigeon had given up his two before they separated, so Nate now had three.

“Might as well,” Nate said, pulling out a stick of gum.

Trevor and Summer did likewise.

“We should make the most of it,” Nate instructed. “Split up, play fast. Try not to wait in line. We’ll only get the full effect for fifteen minutes or so.”

“The effect will get weaker the more gum we use,” Summer mentioned.

“True,” Nate said. “Mr. Stott has been trying to make the effect more stable, but the results still shrink the more sticks you chew. Do the trickiest stuff first.”

“Where are you going to start?” Summer asked Trevor.

“I want to break Nate’s basketball record.”

“I’ll stay here and nail targets,” Nate said.

“I’ll go try Shooting Stars,” Summer said.

“There might not be enough skill to it,” Nate warned. “It could be all luck.”

Summer shrugged. “I’ll find out soon enough.” She stuck the gum in her mouth. “I’ve always liked the games where you have to stop the lights in the right spot.”

Nate put the stick in his mouth and started chewing. He had given his tokens to Trevor. Summer had one of his cards with token credits. He had the other. He swiped it and picked up the rifle Roman had been using.

Nate aimed through the window at the circling vultures. The targets seemed absurdly easy to hit. On his first turn, he practiced aiming for different parts of the targets, and found that his rifle shot slightly down and to the left from where he aimed. It wasn’t misaligned enough to miss when pointed at the center of a target, but might be enough to mess up the tiny winking star and the engine window shot.

On his next turn, Nate lit up the four buzzards and the four train cars with casual effort. Then he waited for the star and shot when it appeared. The

pinprick of light briefly glared red, which it had not done before, convincing him that he had hit it.

The next time the train came by the other window, Nate sighted barely up and to the right of the engine window. When he squeezed the trigger, every target in the shooting gallery flashed. The piano guy started playing, the raccoon peeked out of the honey pot, the bottles spun, the pans clattered, the rattlesnake rattled, the turtle flipped over, the bear trap snapped shut, and all the other movable elements came to life in a burst of motion, light, and sound.

A siren was wailing. Tickets were unspooling. Evidently Chris had been right about a bonus for hitting all ten targets on a single turn.

A man came up to Nate and clapped him on the shoulder. The man had dark, neatly carved sideburns that widened as they got lower. He wore tinted glasses, western boots, blue jeans, and a button-down cowboy shirt with banjos embroidered on the front. "How'd you know to do that, son?" he murmured, almost making it an accusation.

"I heard a rumor."

"Who taught you to shoot like that?"

"I was raised by mountain lions."

The man gave him skeptical look, followed by a slow smile. "You got a name?"

"Nate."

"I'm Cleon. You just won a whole mess of tickets. Saving up for anything special?"

"Maybe."

Another siren went off over by the basketball hoops. Cleon turned to face the pulsing light. "Basketball? That record was up in outer space today!"

A new siren went off in the middle of the game floor. Cleon's jaw dropped. "You've got to be ribbing me! Shooting Stars too?"

"What's going on?" Nate asked, trying to act confused.

"A storm of big winners," Cleon said. "Uncanny. Have we been hacked or something? What exactly did you shoot?"

"All the far targets."

"Including . . . ?"

"The buzzards, the train cars, the star, and the engine window."

Cleon slapped Nate on the shoulder. "You should have 2,500 tickets coming your way. I'll be back to make sure they all pay out. We've got a plague of winners all of a sudden."

Cleon walked away toward the Shooting Stars machine. Nate waited as the endless strand of tickets emerged from the dispenser. He grabbed the long ribbon

and started folding. A modest crowd had gathered to watch the tickets pay out.

By the time the machine had quit, Nate had a sense that all of the tickets were there. He regretted having to wait for them to unspool, since he knew the duration of the Peak Performance gum was limited.

Cleon returned and opened up the ticket dispenser. "There are still some left on the reel," he announced. "This model only holds 4,000 at a time, so it must have been fairly full when you started. Congratulations." He closed up the machine and strode away.

Tickets in hand, Nate went to find Summer. As he moved across the floor, the siren went off at the larger basketball game. Trevor had beaten his other record.

Nate found Summer feeding tickets into the counting machine. "I won in three tries," she said. "The pattern is complicated but not impossible. Five thousand tickets!"

"That's crazy," Nate said. "Why waste time counting tickets? Peak Performance doesn't last long."

"I have a ton of tickets to drag around," she said. "Lots of people crowded to see when I won. Won't I be sort of obvious if I keep winning huge?"

"Who cares? We're not breaking any rules. Did the jackpot lower after you won?"

"No. It stayed the same."

"Take my tickets. I want to try before my gum wears off."

Nate handed over his shooting gallery winnings and hurried to the Shooting Stars machine. A grid composed of hundreds of tiny bulbs twinkled impressively. Each bulb was either white, red, or off. The white lights swirled and cascaded in complex patterns. Among the white lights, ten red lights zipped through the pattern like hyperactive fireflies.

A horizontal line of ten bulbs in the middle of the grid was enclosed by a red rectangle. The rules explained that if you could freeze the display with the ten bulbs lit, you won a hundred tickets. If you could pause the grid while the ten center bulbs were red, you won the jackpot.

Even with his perceptions enhanced by Peak Performance gum, Nate could see that the center bulbs only glowed simultaneously for the briefest instant. And it would require patience, because all of the reds only gathered there roughly once per minute.

The young woman currently playing hit the button to pause the lights and trapped four white ones in the center rectangle. The machine gave her eight tickets.

When she stepped aside, Nate approached the machine. It required two

tokens to play. Nate swiped his card. He watched the flashing pattern of lights, finger poised above the button that would halt them.

The reds were about to synchronize. He would have to get it just right. When he hit the button, all ten red bulbs froze, but there was a single bulb outside the rectangle. He realized that there was an infinitesimal delay between the pressing of the button and the stopping of the bulbs.

Nate swiped his card again and waited. Freezing white lights in the rectangle would be simple. But getting all the reds would be tough even with Peak Performance. He would have to hit the button a tiny bit early.

He saw the reds approaching. He hit the button, trapping ten red bulbs inside the rectangle. Sirens shrieked and lights flashed. Two ribbons of tickets began unreeling.

Cleon hurried over. "You again?" he asked, lowering his tinted glasses just enough to stare at Nate directly. "What is going on?"

"Quick reflexes?" Nate tried.

Cleon stepped close. Nate could smell his cologne. "You know we have security cameras? We'll review your every move."

"I'm glad," Nate said. "You'll see that I won fair and square."

"Maybe," Cleon said, hands on his hips. "But whatever trick you and your friends have discovered, you shouldn't flaunt it so blatantly. We have lots of games here. It's a fun place. But you're here chasing something, and that is no game to us, you read me?"

Nate assumed he was referring to the stamps. "Will the machine deliver all my tickets?"

"It will this time," Cleon replied. "This monster holds two reels of eight thousand each. But we'll be shutting down Shooting Stars for the night for maintenance. Same with the shooting gallery. You might consider making an exit."

Nate scrunched his eyebrows. "Are you throwing me out?"

Cleon shrugged. "I'm not going to haul you over and chuck you out the door, but the way I see it, you've already passed the point when you should have walked away. Might be about time to run."

Cleon sauntered off. He returned as the tickets finished streaming out. Cleon shut down the machine, unplugged it, and hung an OUT OF ORDER sign. Nate met up with Summer and Trevor at the ticket tallying machine.

"All of these games seem super easy," Trevor said. "I broke the record on the football one as well."

"I won a couple more of the light games," Summer said. "Smaller jackpots."

“Has Cleon talked to you?” Nate asked.

“The guy with the sideburns?” Summer asked.

“He seemed suspicious of me,” Trevor said.

“Me too,” Nate said. “He basically told me to beat it.”

“Did you have to go win the biggest jackpot in the place right after me?” Summer asked.

“We’ve all been winning jackpots like it’s easy,” Nate said.

“It was easy,” Trevor muttered.

“But it shouldn’t be,” Nate replied. “We’ve drawn enough attention. Let’s save the rest of our gum and try again tomorrow.”

Nate was feeding his tickets into a machine. It speedily sucked up the long strips. He noted that they went in much more quickly than the other machines spat them out.

“Is it safe to come back here?” Trevor asked in a low voice. “Might have been dumb to win so much so quickly.”

“We know these guys can be dangerous,” Summer added.

“We’ll need to come ready for trouble,” Nate said. “But no way am I quitting the hunt for one of those stamps.”

Lindy



Pigeon sat across from Mr. Stott in a back room of the candy shop, spooning mouthfuls of chocolate sludge out of a mug. Mr. Stott had invented the rich concoction, which was essentially chocolate milk with loads of chocolate and not enough milk. Though it was too sugary for some people's taste, Pigeon loved to overdose on the potent treat.

"They're there now?" Mr. Stott asked.

"That was the plan," Pigeon said after swallowing. "Nate wanted to start earning tickets. I know him. He's already determined to win a stamp. Once he sets his mind on something, he's hard to stop."

Mr. Stott nodded. "That can be a good quality, depending on the situation."

Pigeon took another bite of the concentrated mixture. He had already related what the Battiato brothers had told them, and had also summarized the events of the day. "Are we making a mistake?"

Mr. Stott sighed. "You're certainly out of your depth. The Battiatos are probably in over their heads too. If this enemy overpowered Mozag, there is likely little any of us can do."

"Wasn't Mozag exposed?" Pigeon asked. "He was far from home, and magicians are vulnerable outside of their lairs."

"I know Mozag has at least one portable lair," Mr. Stott said. "A motor home, I believe. And his Cubs hat functions as a limited lair as well. A magician of his caliber is never defenseless. Still, you're right that he would have been much more vulnerable here than at home."

"Do you know any magicians powerful enough to get both John and Mozag?"

Mr. Stott shrugged. "I could make guesses. Few magicians advertise their abilities. Because of the many rivalries in the magical community, it's wise to keep your talents hidden. Without knowing what skills you possess, an enemy

will be less eager to pick a fight. And in the event of a confrontation, if your capabilities are unknown, you keep the element of surprise on your side.”

“So it would be hard to guess who we’re facing,” Pigeon said.

“There would be no accuracy in guessing without more information.”

“Should we walk away?” Pigeon asked. “Should we leave this to the Battiatos?”

“It’s complicated,” Mr. Stott replied, shifting uncomfortably. “I may not love garnering attention from the magical police, but the service they provide our community is invaluable. We can’t lose Mozag. Who knows how many villains would come out of hiding? The process of finding a magician to take his place would cause serious contention, which would only add to the chaos. I’m not sure whether anyone really could replace him.”

“So we need to solve this?” Pigeon said.

“The need is great. There must be a terrible scheme in motion if Mozag got personally involved. Out of our depth or not, we might be harmed more by inaction than by involvement.”

Pigeon licked his spoon. “We need to give it a shot?”

Mr. Stott held a finger to his lips and glanced toward the door. He rose, crossed silently to the door, and opened it, revealing Lindy in a suspicious pose.

“Give what a shot?” Lindy asked without shame.

Mr. Stott scowled deeply, his bushy eyebrows crowding together. “How long have you been there?”

“No time at all,” Lindy replied. “Long enough to hear what Pigeon just asked. How do you always know when I’m listening?”

“Every magician has his secrets,” Mr. Stott replied. “Run along while Pigeon and I finish our conversation. He has some private concerns.”

“I know exactly what concerns him,” Lindy said. “I don’t need to eavesdrop to figure that out. He met with the Battiatos today, and it’s getting messy.”

“This is none of your business, young lady,” Mr. Stott insisted.

Lindy glared at him incredulously. “But all of my friends are involved! What’s my defect? Why can’t I help?”

“Your defect is that I’m your father,” Mr. Stott answered. “It might not seem fair, but this situation is too hazardous for me to let my daughter participate.”

“Oh, right,” Lindy complained. “What a great protector. You’ll send all the kids in the neighborhood into harm’s way, just not me.”

“I’m not sending anybody anywhere,” Mr. Stott replied calmly. “I am not Pigeon’s guardian. I have no authority over him. He came to me for advice. Should I turn him away?”

“Maybe not,” Lindy said. “But do you have to give him magical candy? Isn’t that encouraging him?”

“If I feel the candy might help protect him, I’m willing to provide some.”

Lindy looked to Pigeon. “What’s going on, Pidge? I want to help.”

Pigeon locked eyes with Mr. Stott. The warning there was unmistakable. “Sorry, Lindy. Your dad is your dad.”

“Is he?” she replied harshly. “Then why don’t I remember him? Why do we hardly know each other?” She faced Mr. Stott, her expression livid. “I’m not asking to go to an edgy rock concert. I’m not asking to hang out with druggies. I’m asking for something good! I just want to help. If you won’t let me go with them, at least fill me in on what’s happening!”

“I know you too well,” Mr. Stott said. “If you had details, you wouldn’t be able to resist. This is for your own good, honey. Call me the worst parent ever, but my first priority is keeping you safe.”

“While putting everybody else in danger?” Lindy challenged.

“I have my reasons,” Mr. Stott said, getting frustrated. “This isn’t safe for anybody, but you would be in even greater danger than the others.”

“Because I’m stupider?” Lindy blurted. “Because I’m less capable?”

Mr. Stott turned to Pigeon. “I’m sorry, Pigeon. I’m afraid we’ll have to continue this discussion at another opportunity.”

Lindy backed out the door. “My mistake, Dad. Don’t let me disturb your little powwow with my friend. I don’t want to mess things up for Pigeon. I just wanted to help. It’s bad enough to be useless. I’d hate to also be problematic. I’ll find something that suits me better. Maybe I’ll go upstairs and stare at the wall.”

She closed the door briskly. After a moment of silence, Mr. Stott went and peeked to make sure she was gone.

“You understand why I can’t let her in on this,” Mr. Stott said.

“The Battiatos agreed,” Pigeon replied. “We don’t know who we’re up against. If our enemies figured out Lindy’s identity, she really could be in serious trouble.”

“Even if her memories remain truly irretrievable, once her identity leaks, she will become a target. Some magicians might want revenge. Others may aspire to enlist her. None of the consequences would be good for her—or for us.” Mr. Stott frowned. “I don’t relish keeping your activities from her. She’s already curious enough about where she came from without adding new secrets to the mix.”

“She thinks you adopted her,” Pigeon said.

Mr. Stott held up a finger. “Which is not a lie. I have adopted her. She also believes her parents are long dead, which is probably true. I told her she had an

accident and lost her memory, which is generally true, although I've concealed some key details. I told her that John placed her with me because, as a magician, I was better suited to handle a unique case like hers than most parents would be. Also true."

"Does she keep asking about the details?" Pigeon asked.

"I try not to lie outright," Mr. Stott said. "I told her that even John knew little about her origin. I told her I'm not sure if she'll ever regain her lost memories. I maintain that I know virtually nothing about her past—which is mostly accurate, by the way. I knew little about the magician Belinda White. But I do know that she became our Lindy, which information I withhold."

Pigeon scraped the last of the chocolate sludge from his mug. "Everything is so complicated."

Mr. Stott harrumphed. "Life gets that way."

"You think we should go undercover and try to take these guys down?" Pigeon asked.

"That would be the noble and brave thing to do," Mr. Stott said. "It might even be the wisest thing to do, considering all the trouble that might come unless this magician is stopped. But don't forget that being noble and brave is one of the most proven ways to die young."

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Pigeon replied.

Pigeon lay in bed trying to remember how to fall asleep. Sometimes it was so easy—you just closed your eyes and relaxed, and the rest took care of itself. That was not the case tonight. No position seemed comfortable. No trick could stop his mind from worrying about what new dangers the morning would bring.

Nate had called earlier. Apparently they had caused quite a stir by using Peak Performance to dominate the arcade games. Nate and the others had stopped by the candy shop after Pigeon had left, and Mr. Stott had essentially given his blessing for them to keep trying to infiltrate the arcade by winning tickets.

Pigeon rolled to his other side, curling his knees and bundling his covers, hoping to find a perfect position that would finally let him slip off to sleep and leave his stresses behind. He was supposed to go to Arcadeland tomorrow with the others and keep winning tickets. Nate had basically been thrown out today for that very thing! How did he expect tomorrow to be any different?

The door to his bedroom nudged open. Was Aunt Rhonda checking on him? No, it was Diego.

"Hey, boy," Pigeon said softly. "What are you doing in here?" The Labrador normally slept in his own house out back. Maybe Aunt Rhonda had left a door

ajar.

“Lindy opened a window,” the dog replied.

“You’re talking,” Pigeon said.

“Lindy brought Brain Feed. She’s waiting on the back patio.”

“She wants to talk?” Pigeon asked.

“She seems a little upset,” Diego replied.

Suddenly Pigeon wished he had played possum when Diego entered. The uncomfortable exchange between Lindy and Mr. Stott had been bad enough. He didn’t want to try to manage her curiosity on his own.

“Can you tell her I’m sleeping?” Pigeon asked halfheartedly.

“She ordered me to wake you,” Diego said.

“All right,” Pigeon relented. He got out of bed and put on some slippers. His plaid pajamas looked sort of goofy, so he grabbed a robe from his closet and slid his arms into the loose sleeves. “Do I look okay?”

“I’m a bad judge,” Diego said. “Dogs don’t require artificial coverings.”

“That didn’t stop Mom from dressing you as a cowboy for Halloween.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Pigeon led Diego to the back door.

“Stupid hat,” Diego muttered.

“Sorry I brought it up,” Pigeon said.

“And that bandanna! Cruel and unusual.”

They crept out to the patio.

Lindy stepped out of the shadows. “Hi, Pidge.”

“You’re out late,” Pigeon said.

“I snuck away,” Lindy replied. “I needed to talk to somebody.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Where did I come from, Pigeon?” Lindy asked. “Who am I really?”

“How should I know?”

Lindy wrung her hands. “Somebody must know something! Everyone acts like my origin is some big mystery. I have a feeling there’s more to it than people are telling me.”

Pigeon tried to collect his thoughts. She was wasting no time in taking the conversation exactly to the subject he most wanted to avoid. “We didn’t meet you until after we defeated Mrs. White.” At least that was true in a sense. She looked like she expected him to elaborate. “None of us knew much about your past. One of the guys who worked for Mrs. White made it clear that you had no family. John picked Mr. Stott to watch over you because he thought he would take good care of you and could accept your mysterious background. We all care about you, Lindy.”

“I know you care,” Lindy said. “I don’t doubt that. Dad is just so protective lately. He has let me do some crazy things with you guys, but he seems extra worried about me trying to help John. Maybe he’s just being cautious, but it started me thinking. It makes me wonder if he knows more than he’s telling me.”

Pigeon licked his lips. His fingers felt fidgety. “I don’t know anything.”

“I’m sure you’re not supposed to spill any secrets,” Lindy said. “But we’re friends, right?”

“Of course.”

Her voice became more sincere. It sounded like she might cry. “I’m having a hard time, Pidge. A really hard time. Can you imagine having no memories of yourself? Of the person you call Dad? Of any friends or family? I can’t shake the suspicion that you all know more than you’re saying. It’s there in certain looks you give each other. I know you guys think you’re protecting me from something, but it’s making me crazy. I need somebody to be straight with me.”

Pigeon felt unsure how to respond. He had no right to give her the information she wanted. Knowledge of her past could end up harming her. It could harm everyone.

“Everybody clams up when I talk like this,” Lindy said. “I don’t push the issue too often. At first I felt too off balance to really worry about it. I just wanted to fit in. But lately it has been gnawing at me. When Dad banned me from helping you guys, he forced me to really confront the issue. Let me tell you my guess. I’m worried . . .” She put her hands up to her face, as if hesitant to utter the next words. She finally whispered them: “I’m worried that my parents were bad guys. Evil magicians, maybe, working with Mrs. White. And John Dart had to lock them away. Or maybe they got killed? I was devastated, so somebody erased my memory. Then John felt guilty and brought me to live with Mr. Stott.”

Pigeon felt tense. She expected a response. He felt like the truth must be written all over his face. Her guess wasn’t too far off—except her parents weren’t the evil magicians. She was. What had Mr. Stott said about handling these inquiries? He tried to respond without blatantly lying.

“I don’t know anything about your parents,” Pigeon said. “As far as I know, they might have been really good people. Maybe they were hexed by bad magicians or something. Maybe Mrs. White kept them prisoner. Maybe they weren’t magical at all.”

“Maybe some big spell killed my parents and wiped my memory at the same time,” Lindy said. “Somebody threw a magic bagel of power at us and I lost my family.”

“Not all magic is edible,” Pigeon pointed out.

“Do you get why I’m freaked?” Lindy asked. “If my real parents were good people, why all the secrecy? They must have been bad. It must be a dirty secret. Maybe I hated them. Maybe I loved them. I might never know. Am I supposed to believe that I lost my memory and nobody knows how it happened or where I came from? Seriously? What happened before I turned up in that candy shop with you, Nate, Summer, and John? My life didn’t start at that moment. What happened before?”

“What did John tell you?”

“Dad and John both told me that I lost my memory by accident. They told me no magic can restore it. They claimed not to understand the spell. They said they never knew my parents, but they’re certain that I have no living relatives. My first memories from the candy shop are hazy. Everything was so new and unfamiliar. I felt deeply confused. I hardly heard what anyone was saying. It was as if in that instant, fully conscious, I had just been born.”

“If Mr. Stott can’t explain what happened,” Pigeon said, “I don’t have a prayer.”

“Does it have to do with Mrs. White?” Lindy asked. “The lady who owned the candy shop before Dad? Was I her prisoner? Her helper? I know she was a big villain.”

“John and Mr. Stott defeated her,” Pigeon said. “We helped. Nate especially. She went away. She won’t be back.”

“Did Mrs. White do something to my parents?” Lindy asked. “I mean, my first memories are at her candy shop.”

“I don’t know, Lindy,” Pigeon said, terrified by how close her questions came to revealing the truth. “I’d never met you before that day. I don’t know much about what Mrs. White was doing, except that she was trying to take over the town with her magic. I was a captive there myself. Have you considered that there might not be any big conspiracy to hide your past? Maybe nobody can answer your questions because nobody knows?”

After staring at Pigeon searchingly, Lindy sighed. “It stinks getting left out. I want to help John. I want to help you guys.”

“We don’t even understand what’s going on yet,” Pigeon said.

“What do you know?”

Pigeon paused. How much should he say? Anything?

“Have you ever felt left out, Pigeon?” Lindy asked.

“All the time,” he confessed. “I mean, I used to feel like that all the time. Before I became friends with Summer, Trevor, and Nate.”

“That’s how I’m feeling,” Lindy said. “I’m wondering if I have any real friends.”

She *was* his friend. He couldn't tell her where she came from. Shouldn't he tell her something? Making her feel friendless and desperate might be worse than telling her that she used to be a psychotic, murderous magician.

"You can win tickets at Arcadeland," Pigeon finally said. "That new arcade in Walnut Hills."

"You just blew my mind," Lindy said dryly. "Why haven't I heard about this on the news? How have they covered this up?"

"There's more," Pigeon said uncomfortably. "You use the tickets to buy prizes. The most expensive prizes are four hand stamps that grant membership into four different clubs. We think the kids in the clubs can get magic candy like Mr. Stott makes. We're not positive about anything. We have no idea who runs Arcadeland. We're not even sure about the clubs. But we're investigating."

"You're trying to earn tickets to join the clubs?" Lindy asked. "So you can find out what's really going on?"

"Pretty much," Pigeon replied, worried that he had said too much.

"I could help," Lindy said, her eyes lighting up. "You need help earning tickets."

"Lindy, no," Pigeon said. "Please. Your dad would kill me if I got you involved. I trusted you by telling you. Don't betray that by getting us busted."

"He won't know," she promised. "I'll be sneaky."

"It could be extra dangerous for you," Pigeon said, his mind racing. "We don't know where you came from, but we suspect your origins must be magical. I mean, your memory was wiped, and we found you at Mrs. White's. Nobody wants you exposed to magical bad guys."

Lindy regarded Pigeon thoughtfully. "You guys are going there tomorrow?"

"Right when it opens at nine," Pigeon said.

"Don't stress," Lindy said with resignation. "I won't crash the party." She reached out and rubbed Pigeon's shoulder. "Thanks for trusting me. I appreciate it. I won't let you down."

"Okay. Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

"You were great. I should go. You need your rest."

"Good night, Lindy."

"Good night."

Odd Hours



Hunched over a rifle at the shooting gallery, Nate chewed his fourth stick of Peak Performance gum since entering the arcade. When the doors had opened at nine, he, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon had wasted no time getting started.

By his third consecutive stick of Peak Performance, Nate could feel the effects waning. The light games were getting tougher to freeze at the right time, and he could no longer break the high scores on basketball, Skee-Ball, or the football tossing game. But if he took his time, he could still hit all ten of the far targets at the shooting gallery.

The arcade workers had made some adjustments since last night. Shooting Stars remained out of order, as was a high-paying game where the player spun a huge wheel. The shooting gallery jackpot for the ten far targets had been reduced to 250 tickets. When the ten farthest targets were hit, sirens no longer indicated that anything unusual had happened. Nate saw the lack of attention as a good thing, although he lamented losing the huge payout. Still, 250 tickets remained very attractive when you could claim them every turn.

Nate was sighting through the window at the star when a hand came down on the back of his neck. He accidentally pulled the trigger and missed the shot. Disgruntled, he looked up to find Roman standing over him.

“You’re swimming in tickets,” Roman said.

Nate had won the shooting game nine times in a row, which meant 2250 tickets were currently snarled around him on the ground. “I got a hot tip about the gallery.”

“You have a weird way of thanking me,” Roman said. “It’s barely ten and the records are all worse than yesterday. Didn’t you hear what I told you?”

“We upped them little by little,” Nate assured him. “We started right when they opened. We never beat the basketball records by more than three points. We

usually only won by one or two.”

“They’re already so high!” Roman complained. “You would have had to raise them every try.”

“It happened pretty quickly,” Nate admitted. “A few of us were working at it.”

Roman shook his head, clearly frustrated. “My day is shot. Without records to beat, earning tickets will be a pain. How many have you won this morning?”

Nate hesitated to answer. “Lots. Over 8,000.”

“In an hour?”

“I had a hot streak.”

Roman shook his head, trying not to let his irritation show. “You’ve obviously got the shooting gallery figured out. Did you snag the jackpot?”

“Yesterday.”

“Unbelievable.”

“They reset the prize. It pays 250 now if you hit all the far targets on one turn.”

“What was the prize yesterday?”

“Twenty-five hundred.”

Roman made a low whistle. “You’re raking them in faster than anyone I’ve seen.”

“It’s going all right,” Nate said.

Roman sighed. “Congrats. I better go start playing. Tomorrow I’ll make sure to come when the doors open.” He walked off.

Nate could tell Roman wasn’t happy, and he felt a little bad about it. He knew Roman was excited to earn a stamp, and the process would be slower while the records stayed high. But in a way they were doing him a favor. Roman didn’t know what he was getting himself into. The perks that came with the stamp would be cool, but there would be strings attached. Bad people were running this arcade. People who had taken down John Dart. The deeper Roman got involved, the greater the danger he would face.

Nate settled back in and started shooting targets again. He hit all of the far targets three times in succession before somebody cleared their throat behind him. Nate looked up, recognizing Cleon.

“You couldn’t resist?”

“We’re not cheating,” Nate replied. “We have the same right to play as anyone else. You guys set the rules. It’s not our fault if we’re good.”

“Gather your tickets,” Cleon said. “The director wants to have a chat.”

“Are we in a movie?”

“The director of the arcade, smart guy.”

“Why does the director get to chat with me?” Nate resisted. “Is he a police officer? Are you? Am I under arrest for winning tickets?”

Cleon leaned closer. “You’re in her arcade. You’re on her property. If you wish to continue playing here, you’ll have a talk with her.”

Cleon awaited a response. If this would provide a chance to meet the person running the arcade, Nate supposed he should play along. It might give him the knowledge the Battiatos needed. Then again, he might end up disappearing just like John and Mozag.

Nate noticed Pigeon watching him from not too far off. Trevor was observing from across the room. His friends could call in the Battiatos if he disappeared. Besides, who knew what Cleon might do if Nate tried to run? The man currently had the air of a disgruntled bouncer.

“I’ll come,” Nate said, collecting his tickets.

“Good choice,” Cleon replied, kneeling to help.

Trevor watched Cleon lead Nate away from the shooting gallery. He kept one hand in his pocket, fingering the Shock Bits hidden inside. At the first sign of any struggle, he was ready to spit out his gum and replace it with the electrifying candy.

Summer walked up to Nate and Cleon with a camera and blatantly snapped a picture of them together. Shaking his head slightly, Cleon gave her an amused smirk as he walked past her. She returned his attention with an innocent grin. Trevor thought it was a smart move. With Cleon knowing she had photographic evidence, he would think twice before letting Nate come to harm.

Nate seemed to go along willingly. Trevor followed until they passed through a nondescript door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY.

Pigeon came up beside him. “What should we do?”

“I want the Battiatos ready to move,” Trevor said. “You have the other walkie-talkie?”

“Yeah.”

“Keep an eye on that door. Call if anything happens. And watch my tickets.”

“Got it.”

Trevor handed over his tickets to Pigeon. Summer approached as Trevor headed to the door.

“You’re telling them?” she asked.

Trevor nodded. “Help Pidge keep watch.”

On his way out, Trevor noticed a girl staring at him. She looked to be in her older teens or early twenties. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a simple

ponytail. She wore a blue Arcadeland work apron and was sweeping debris into a dustpan attached to a pole. Her glance moved past him as Trevor returned the eye contact. She had a slight build—fairly short and quite slender.

Trevor ignored her until he reached the doors to the outside. As he pushed through, he glanced over and saw her watching him again.

Only after reaching the Arcadeland parking lot did Trevor realize that he wasn't sure where the Battiatos could be found. He scanned the lot for a white van, then tried the street, but saw neither a van nor any sign of the husky twins.

Trevor crossed the mostly vacant parking lot to the street. Gazing up and down the sidewalk, Trevor saw plenty of vehicles, but no van and no twins. He started paying more attention to the surrounding rooftops and businesses. Where were they? Could they see him?

A plain white van pulled around a corner a couple of blocks down the street. Trevor watched as it pulled over to the side of the road. It was still well over a block away. They were probably worried about being spotted by Arcadeland employees.

Trevor walked briskly to the van. When he arrived, the side door opened and he climbed inside.

Ziggy sat at the wheel. Victor had opened the door.

"Trouble?" Victor asked.

"Cleon took Nate through a door marked for employees," Trevor explained.

"Did Nate go willingly?" Ziggy asked.

"Seemed like it," Trevor said. "Summer and Pigeon are still watching the door. Pigeon has a walkie-talkie." Trevor held up his.

"I wonder what they're up to?" Victor mused.

"They noticed the kids earning tickets too easily," Ziggy said simply. "These guys are players. No player likes getting played."

"This could help us," Victor replied, his large fist bumping against his forehead. "Nate could learn something."

"The kid could be in trouble," Ziggy said.

"We need to be ready to act," Victor said.

"I'm worried about him," Trevor said.

Ziggy and Victor gazed at each other.

"Should we get ready?" Ziggy asked.

"Sure, just in case," Victor replied.

"My turn, right?"

"Your turn."

Victor bowed his head. He started to sag. His coat was fitting looser. Trevor watched Victor's hand transform, the fingers getting subtly shorter and slimmer

while the back of the hand expanded slightly, swelling with fat.

When Victor raised his head, Trevor gasped. Victor's cheeks drooped flabbily. His eyelids seemed heavier, the creases around his mouth more pronounced. Blubbery jowls dangled unhealthily. Despite his looking fatter and older, his clothes seemed baggy, as if he had shrunk. Victor had wilted from robust to sickly in a matter of seconds.

"That's the stuff," Ziggy said from the driver's seat, his voice heartier. He turned and gave Trevor a cocky smile. His face appeared more chiseled and masculine. Not only did he look younger, but his neck bulged with muscle, new veins suddenly prominent. He loosened his tie, apparently trying to accommodate his thicker build.

"You good?" Victor asked, his voice a bit wheezy.

"That's plenty," Ziggy answered. "Any more and I'll pop the seams on this suit."

"What just happened?" Trevor asked. He had an idea, but he wanted confirmation.

"Victor loaned me some of his vitality," Ziggy said. "I gained a few inches in height, a bunch of muscle, more endurance—the works. Sometimes one really strong guy is preferable to a pair of pretty strong guys."

"It leaves me feeling wiped out," Victor said. "Not completely worthless, but certainly worth less."

"We take turns," Ziggy explained. "He got to be superhuman last time."

"It's the only fair way," Victor said.

"This is in case we need to take action?" Trevor asked.

"You're catching on," Ziggy said with a wink. "I kind of hope Pigeon calls."

"No you don't," Victor said. "It would mean Nate is in trouble."

"I don't mean the kid any harm," Ziggy apologized. "You know how it is, Vic. I itch to be in motion. I feel like a sports car in the slow lane. I want to run, climb, maybe knock some heads together."

"Patience," Victor said. "Nate might be acquiring important intelligence. We wait for the call."

Cleon escorted Nate to an office, opened the door, and stepped aside. Nate entered. The door closed behind him. Cleon had not followed him in.

An Asian woman sat behind a large desk, typing on a laptop. The office was nothing fancy. A bulletin board on one wall displayed shift schedules along with some charts and graphs. Piles of paperwork cluttered the desk, spread among a few knickknacks, including a tiny hula girl and a fancy snow globe.

Two chairs were positioned in front of the desk, facing the woman.

“Are you the director?” Nate asked.

She held up one finger, eyes down, still typing briskly with one hand. Her fingers rattled against the keyboard so quickly that Nate wondered if she might be typing nonsense. Then she looked up, stood, and smiled. Her hair was short and tidy. She was fairly tall. She wore a blouse with a blazer over it.

“I’m Katie Sung,” she said professionally, extending a hand to Nate over the desk.

Nate stepped forward and shook it. Her skin felt cool, her grip limp. He noticed that her nails were short.

“I’m Nate.”

“Nathan Sutter,” she agreed. “Have a seat.” She indicated one of the chairs.

Surprised and perplexed that she knew his full name, Nate sat down. “You own this place?”

“I wish,” she said, her smile widening. She sat. “I’m the director here, appointed by the owner.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“A peculiar question. Should you be under arrest?”

“Not unless it’s illegal to be good at arcade games.”

Her smile faltered. She brushed her fingertips together. “Uncommonly good. Your friends too. Supernaturally good. Are you chewing gum?”

Nate froze mid-chew. Busted.

“Did I say something to upset you?” she pressed.

“I just felt like I was back in school for a minute. My teacher last year wasn’t a fan of gum chewing.”

“You were in fifth grade?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t mind the habit,” Katie said. “Not unless it allows kids to sink hundreds of free throws in a row.”

“Performance-enhancing gum?” Nate asked, trying to sound incredulous.

Katie settled back in her chair. “You tell me.”

Nate shrugged. “Sounds ridiculous.”

“As ridiculous as hitting the ten toughest targets in the shooting gallery over and over again? As ridiculous as winning the Shooting Stars jackpot at will?”

Nate rubbed the wooden arms of his chair. “Is this arcade for losers only?”

“We don’t mind winners, Nate. We like winners. Actually, we adore winners. But we prefer winners to use their natural abilities.”

“Felt natural to me.”

Katie closed her laptop. “Why are you here, Nate? You and your three

friends. What are you after?”

“You could probably guess.”

“You won nearly ten thousand tickets in just over an hour. Humor me.”

Nate folded his hands. “If you don’t want people to go after your stamps, don’t offer them as prizes.”

“And why would you want a stamp?”

“Because I’m curious. Anything worth so many tickets must be amazing.”

“Indeed,” she said. “Enough prattle. I know who you are, Nate. I know you were involved with Belinda White, and you’re now involved with Sebastian Stott. Did he send you to spy on us?”

“Belinda who? Sebastian what?”

“Don’t play dumb. You’ve insulted us enough by taking our tickets.”

“Mr. Stott would rather I wasn’t here. He thinks you guys might be dangerous.”

Katie leaned forward. “And what do you think?”

Nate knew he could be in trouble if he didn’t play this right. He grinned. “I think I like magic candy. And I think you might have some.”

“Magic what?”

“Exactly.”

Showing a hint of a smile, Katie regarded Nate silently for a moment. “I don’t know what sort of operation Sebastian is running, but this isn’t a game.”

Nate snorted. “You have games all over the place.”

“We have games, yes. We know games. This isn’t one.”

“You’re recruiting.”

She gave no answer.

“I’ve been through this before,” Nate said. “Different magician, same drill. Don’t you want good people? The best? What’s wrong with me and my friends doing our best to win?”

“We’re not eager for candidates with divided allegiances,” Katie said.

“Is that another way of saying you don’t want anyone with experience? With proven skills?”

“We don’t want to draw too much attention,” she said. “Your antics out there have to stop. It’s one thing for us to know how you’re scoring so well. It’s quite another for the general public to start catching on.”

“If you don’t want us putting on a show, you could just give us each a stamp. Or just give us the tickets.”

Her eyes flashed. “You want easy tickets?”

“We want tickets. You want us to stop winning so many. I’m thinking up possible solutions.”

Her demeanor predatory, the director stood and leaned forward, her palms on her desk. “Nathan, you tell me the truth or this will not end well for you. Did you break in here and steal tickets last night?”

The accusation startled him. “No.” He didn’t have to lie.

Her eyes narrowed. “Where were you last night?”

“At home, mostly. After I left here I didn’t come back until this morning.”

“You realize that we have cameras. We know exactly how many tickets you four have earned.”

“Are you missing some tickets?”

She kept staring at him like she suspected he was hiding something. “No.”

“That Cleon guy doesn’t seem very—”

“I’m not worried about our employees,” Katie snapped. She sat down. “Let’s get back to you and your friends. The stamps must be earned. Giving away tickets would defeat part of our purpose. We’re looking for a certain kind of person. We don’t want to disrupt our little contest.”

“But you don’t want us winning so many tickets in front of your customers.”

“You’re catching on.”

“But we need tons of tickets quickly in order to get the stamps.”

Katie fingered her slim gold necklace. “Quite the dilemma.”

“Even if there were such a thing as magical candy that would make winning easy, I don’t see any rules against it.”

“It’s hard to post rules against the impossible. Some rules are quietly understood and are therefore quietly enforced.”

Nate stretched his legs and stared at the floor. The carpet was not particularly nice. “Are you threatening us?”

“Are you taking advantage of us?”

“I want a stamp. If you try to ban us, we could get pretty loud about it. We could make a much bigger scene than by winning lots of tickets.”

Katie gave Nate a challenging look. “Now are you threatening me?”

“Only if you discriminate against us. I just want a chance to win like everybody else.”

“But you’re not like everybody else. We can’t afford the attention.”

Nate nodded. “How about a compromise? If you can’t give the tickets away, but you don’t want us earning them in front of everybody, why not open up early for us? Give us a few hours before the crowds arrive. Just a few hours each day, until we earn enough.”

Katie considered him. “Five to eight?”

“All the machines open. No point in limiting us if we’re working in secret.”

“I have no desire to prolong the process.”

“We’ll already be pretty limited. Other people will be able to play twelve hours per day. We’d only have a quarter of that time.”

“Once I start agreeing to your terms, you can stop selling.”

“Right,” Nate said, a little embarrassed. “Five to eight would work. We’ll stay away otherwise. You can reset our records after we go.”

“We have a side door.”

“We’ll be sneaky,” Nate assured her. “Nobody will know.”

“They better not,” Katie said. “Word of this gets around, the deal is off.”

“We’re good with secrets.”

“Okay. Tomorrow at five in the morning.”

“Thanks,” Nate said.

Her eyebrows lifted. “Don’t thank me yet. Once you earn a stamp, you become part of us. We make sure of that. We can’t have outsiders interfering. You might be getting more than you bargained for.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Nate said, trying to act confident even though the warning concerned him.

“Don’t make trouble for us,” Katie warned sternly. “Don’t try to mess with us. Do this right, and you might end up more satisfied than you can guess.”

Katie started shuffling some papers. While her eyes were averted, Nate removed the small digital camera from his pocket. He held it on his lap. He had not yet seen Katie in the arcade. She might not be the owner, but she must be part of the inner circle. A description would be worth little. Same with her name, since it could easily be fake. But a photo might prove useful to Ziggy and Victor.

“I have high hopes,” Nate said.

She stood. “Anything else?”

Nate rose, holding the camera near the side of his waist, attempting to be subtle. He tried to keep it pointed at her. Should he risk taking a shot? Her eyes were on him again. “I think I’m good.”

“Did you want a picture?”

Nate froze. He hadn’t snapped a shot yet. “My friends and I are big on recon,” he explained sheepishly, holding up the camera.

“We have cameras too. We’ve noticed you taking photographs. Might as well get a good one.” She came around the side of her desk and smiled, one hand on her hip.

Nate aimed a shot and snapped it. “Thanks. Although the pose takes the mystery out of it.”

“Well, I doubt the low angle together with the poor aim would have been very flattering. I do have my pride.”

“See you tomorrow.”

Her smile changed. “I doubt you’ll see me, but I’ll be watching.”

Stamps



We believe her true name is Suyin Chen,” Victor said, staring at the image on the digital camera. “You were right to feel nervous. She’s a ComKin—a Combat Kinetic.”

Nate leaned against the inner wall of the van. Ziggy was currently driving away from Arcadeland along with Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon. When Nate first saw Victor, the man had looked terrible, but then he and Ziggy had evened things out, so now he was back to normal.

“A ComKin. Which means what?” Pigeon asked.

“You remember the dwarf?” Ziggy asked.

“The one working for Mrs. White,” Summer said. “He was a Kinetic. He could store up energy, then release it all at once.”

“A mighty throw,” Victor said. “A tremendous jump. A devastating punch. The dwarf was dangerous, but in bursts. His energy was volatile. ComKins have learned to harness a similar ability in a different way. They store up a larger reservoir of kinetic energy, and, instead of unleashing it in a single burst, they release it in a focused stream that can go on for minutes.”

“They’re usually trained in a variety of fighting techniques,” Ziggy said. “Martial arts, wrestling, boxing—you name it. They’re a pain in every sense of the word.”

“Do you know what magician Suyin works with?” Summer asked.

“Yusiv in Poland, right?” Victor checked.

Ziggy nodded. “And Kwan in Singapore. And Villaroel in Peru. Anyone else?”

“That nut on that island? The one who loves water?”

“Right. I forgot about him.”

“Don’t you guys have a computer to run her name through?” Trevor asked.

Victor tapped his temple. “We keep our data in here. We’re all frequently

briefed. Pictures, bios, mission reports. Magicians mistrust technology.”

“Suyin Chen has gone by other names than Katie Sung,” Ziggy said. “She’s a mercenary, taking jobs contract by contract. She could be working for anyone.”

“Not *anyone*,” Victor corrected. “She’s expensive.”

“We already know her employer is well funded,” Ziggy reminded him.

“True,” Victor replied. “Did you kids learn anything else?”

“I’m concerned about their nachos,” Pigeon said.

Ziggy rubbed his belly sympathetically. “You need me to find a restroom?”

“Not because I ate them,” Pigeon explained. “I noticed lots of people buying them. Who stops by an arcade in the morning for nachos to go? I saw seven or eight people. And several more eating them there.”

“Could you get us a sample?” Victor asked.

“I meant to,” Pigeon said. “Then Nate returned, and it seemed more important to come talk to you guys right away.”

“Think they’ll be on sale in the morning?” Ziggy asked.

“When they open early for us?” Nate said doubtfully. “I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Victor said. “I’ll find somebody to buy us a sample.”

“We did background checks on those kids you met,” Ziggy mentioned. “Roman Cruz, Marisa Fuentes, and Chris Hughes. On paper they’re good kids from regular families. Excellent students. Some minor discipline issues with Chris, but no criminal history.”

“We’ll learn plenty more about them if we earn stamps together,” Nate said.

“How is the hunt progressing?” Victor asked.

“Together we’re almost to 45,000,” Pigeon said.

“By tomorrow we’ll easily have enough for a stamp if we combine our winnings,” Trevor noted.

“We should get somebody a stamp as soon as possible,” Summer asserted.

“Nate should get a jet stamp,” Pigeon said. “Those are the closest to running out, and he’s already getting to know those kids. They’re expecting him.”

“It would be good to have one of us on the inside,” Trevor agreed. “Who knows what might already be going on? The rest of us could keep earning tickets. Maybe one of us can join each club.”

“That’s ambitious,” Victor said dubiously. “Having all of you in clubs would increase the risk, and it might not yield more info than we’d get from a single insider.”

“It’ll let us watch out for each other,” Summer argued. “Besides, who

knows what opportunities might be available to kids with different stamps?”

“Valid points,” Ziggy approved.

“Will you guys drive us?” Trevor asked.

“You need to be there by five in the morning?” Ziggy asked. “Absolutely. I love starting early. We’ll bring bagels.”

“We should meet around four-thirty,” Victor said. “I’m not as enthusiastic as Ziggy about early starts, but you ought to arrive on time. We’ll meet at the bottom of Monroe.”

“Early to bed, early to rise,” Ziggy said.

“Early or late, sleep is sleep,” Victor grunted.

When Pigeon got home, he found an ice cream truck parked down the street from his house. The faded blue vehicle had the words Candy Wagon emblazoned on the side. He immediately recognized it as Mr. Stott’s.

Pigeon rushed over to the truck. Mr. Stott had never waited at his house before. Pigeon found the magician sitting behind the wheel.

“What’s wrong?” Pigeon asked.

“Come inside.”

Pigeon climbed into the passenger seat.

“Would you like a treat?” Mr. Stott asked.

“I’m all right.”

“Have you seen Lindy?”

Pigeon paused. Mr. Stott was her guardian. He deserved honest answers. “She came to my house last night.”

“I knew she left last night. She returned in the small hours of the morning. We had an argument about her leaving. She made it clear that if I would not grant permission, she would do whatever she wanted. I made it clear that such behavior was unacceptable. She ran off again afterward. She hasn’t come home. I’ve been looking for her for hours.”

“I haven’t seen Lindy today,” Pigeon said honestly. “She was pretty worked up when she came to visit me. She probably just needs to blow off some steam.”

Mr. Stott rubbed his beard. “I’m worried about her. And a little concerned about the rest of us. As much as I have grown to care for Lindy, we must not forget who she used to be.”

“Right.”

“I can’t find her anywhere. I worry she may have gotten into trouble.”

“I’ll keep an eye out,” Pigeon said. “If she shows up, I’ll call.”

“Could you tell the other kids to be on the lookout?” Mr. Stott asked.

“Sure,” Pigeon said. “I’ll get in touch with them right away.”

“How are things at the arcade?”

“Nate has almost enough tickets to join one of the clubs. One of the women working there is Suyin Chen. She’s going by the name of Katie Sung.”

Mr. Stott looked startled. “I know of Suyin Chen. She’s a dangerous woman. You don’t want to fight her. If circumstances ever lead to a physical confrontation, run, and don’t look back.”

“That’s my basic plan with any confrontation,” Pigeon replied.

“Smart lad. Still no clue who owns Arcadeland?”

“Not yet. We’re hoping Nate might find out if he earns a stamp.”

“All right.” Mr. Stott caressed the steering wheel. “You kids take care. I’m working on a new batch of Peak Performance gum. You four are using it up at an alarming rate.”

“Sorry,” Pigeon said.

Mr. Stott waved away the apology. “It’s for a good cause. I wish I could make the effect stay at full potency with consecutive uses. Moon Rocks work every time, regardless of the quantity consumed. Brain Feed seems to work better when administered often. But not Peak Performance.”

“It’s working fine,” Pigeon encouraged. “We’re cleaning up on tickets.”

“I’m glad. Stay prepared for trouble. And watch for Lindy.”

“Will do,” Pigeon pledged. He climbed down from the ice cream truck and watched as it drove away, not playing any music.

The next morning, Todd looked tired when he admitted Nate and his friends through the side door. Todd and Cleon were the only visible employees. They supervised as Nate, Summer, Trevor, and Pigeon dominated game after game. Attractions like Shooting Stars paid lots of tickets but also gobbled time, since all of the tickets had to pay out before another turn could be taken. Having the arcade to themselves allowed Nate and his friends to move around aggressively, playing other games while tickets spooled out after a big score. It was only a matter of minutes before Nate had enough tickets to claim a stamp.

Todd went behind the redemption counter when Nate approached.

“Finally going to cash in some tickets?” Todd asked.

“One jet stamp, please.”

Todd covered his mouth and chuckled. “You only started playing here a couple days ago and you’re already taking the big prize. Talk about some serious skills. Let’s count your tickets.”

Nate handed over four cards and Todd scanned them.

“You have almost two thousand tickets to spare,” Todd said. “Nice work. Your extra tickets are on this card. I assume you’ll want it for your friends?”

“Yeah, we worked together.”

Todd handed the card back to Nate. “No rules against pooling your tickets.” Todd crouched and removed the jet stamp from under the counter. He handed it to Nate. “Last one.”

“Last one?” Nate furrowed his brow. Roman must have finished up yesterday after all. “Who took the second to last?”

“I can’t share that with you,” Todd said. “It was claimed yesterday evening. You’re welcome to ask around. Or you can find out when your first stamp gets applied. The other Jets will be there.”

“When it gets applied?” Nate wondered.

“You earned the stamp itself. The ink comes later. Come back at ten this morning, we’ll get you hooked up. Then you’ll learn what your prize really means.”

Pocketing his jet stamp, Nate turned to rejoin his friends. They gathered around him, and he dug it out of his pocket.

“Doesn’t look like much,” Trevor said.

“The stamp itself probably isn’t valuable,” Pigeon speculated. “It’s like a ticket.”

“I’m supposed to come back at ten to get the stamp applied,” Nate said. “I guess I’ll find out more then.” He held up a card. “This has about two thousand tickets. We should start earning more.”

Pigeon had a knack for hitting the Shooting Stars jackpot on every try; Trevor kept claiming the grand prize on Wheel of Destiny; Summer worked some of the other games where the player had to freeze lights; and Nate methodically upped the record on basketball. Todd and Cleon watched in disbelief, replacing rolls of tickets as needed.

The flood of tickets slowed as the kids moved into their fourth, fifth, and sixth sticks of Peak Performance. Cleon and Todd stopped having to refill ticket dispensers quite as regularly. Pigeon remained able to freeze Shooting Stars for the jackpot longer than the others, but when his average fell below once every twenty tries, he moved on.

As Peak Performance elevated their abilities less and less, they migrated to the shooting gallery and the basketball game. They could no longer beat any records, but they could hit preset benchmarks to earn reasonable payouts.

By the time Cleon announced that he and Todd needed to close up to prepare to open the arcade to the public, the four kids had accumulated more than 75,000 tickets. They gathered near the redemption counter to confer.

“Who gets the next stamp?” Nate asked.

“We should buy a tank,” Pigeon said. “It costs more tickets than the racecar

or the submarine, so it might be more important.”

“I could do the tank,” Summer offered.

“Fine with me,” Trevor said. “I like the look of the racecar.”

“Does that make me the submarine?” Pigeon asked.

“Do you mind?” Summer checked.

“Not really,” Pigeon replied. “We don’t even know what the stamps mean.”

“Can we buy another stamp?” Summer called.

Todd hustled over. “Which one?”

“I want a tank,” Summer said.

“Nice choice,” Todd said, handing over the stamp. “Two tanks left. You can come by at eleven to get it applied.” He slapped his hands on the counter. “All set?”

“Thanks,” Summer said.

“Great,” Todd replied. “Beat it for now. We have to get ready to open up for the mere mortals.”

“We’re mortals,” Nate said.

Todd squinted and wagged his hand, suggesting that Nate’s statement was iffy. “Maybe part of the time. Not so much when you’re chewing that gum. Hey, I don’t blame you. I miss the days when those kinds of enhancements worked on me. Enjoy it while you can. You get older every day.”

Nate knew that a lot of the magic produced by magicians worked better on young people, which was why they recruited kids. But he hadn’t wondered much about what happened to those kids once they grew up. He wanted to ask follow-up questions, but Cleon was shooing them toward the door. “This plan only works if you leave when you’re supposed to go. We’ll be here tomorrow. We’ll be rooting for you to finish your stamp quest so we can get some proper sleep.”

Pigeon led the way out the side door. Heavy morning traffic clogged Canal Street. At five the street had been quiet—now it was bumper to bumper. They walked down the sidewalk for three blocks, then turned up a side street to the find the white van waiting as promised.

“Earn many tickets?” Victor asked as the kids entered.

“Two stamps and a bunch of extras to put toward tomorrow,” Pigeon replied.

“It was almost too easy,” Summer said.

“Peak Performance takes the challenge out of it,” Trevor said. “We’re lucky they didn’t stop us from using it.”

“They want resourceful people,” Nate said. “They just didn’t want us showing off in front of other customers.”

“Watch yourselves,” Victor cautioned. “If they know you have magical

enhancers, they know you're involved with another magician. I can't imagine they'll be quick to trust you."

"Do you think they're setting us up?" Pigeon asked.

"One way or another, I'm sure they are," Ziggy said.

"John needs us," Nate said. "I have a meeting at ten. Summer at eleven. It might be risky, but at least we'll finally get a chance to learn more about what's going on. Hopefully it's not too late to help our friends."

Jets



Nate felt nervous as he approached the redemption counter ten minutes early. He tried to persuade himself that he wasn't as alone as he felt. Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon were stationed nearby with Shock Bits, Flame Outs, and other candy. The Battiatos waited right outside, ready to charge to the rescue.

Nate had debated over whether to bring any magical candy to the meeting. In the end, he decided that since the arcade employees seemed to already suspect he had been using magical candy, it couldn't hurt to have some on him in case of an emergency. He had two doses of Shock Bits, two Moon Rocks, and a Frost Bite. He would have liked to have brought a Sweet Tooth, but none of Mrs. White's remained, and Mr. Stott had failed when he had tried to replicate them.

A trio of teenagers stood at the glass counter choosing prizes. Nate didn't recognize the woman helping them. A hand clamped down on his shoulder from behind.

"You're early," Cleon said. His hair and sideburns looked more styled than they had this morning. His shirt had a glossy sheen and rhinestone buttons.

"Better than late," Nate replied.

"Let's head on back."

Nate followed Cleon through a different EMPLOYEES ONLY door than he had used on his previous visit behind the scenes at Arcadeland. Soon they moved along a cramped, concrete hallway crowded with pipes and electrical equipment.

"So this is where the magic happens," Nate said.

"Trust me, kid," Cleon replied. "The magic around here isn't in the plumbing or the wiring."

They stopped in front of a wooden door.

"Here we are," Cleon said. "Be polite. This is no joke. You brought the stamp?"

Nate held it up.

Cleon opened the door, revealing a plain room where a lone man sat at a bare table. He had black, wild hair, either gelled or greasy, and a thin beard that traced his jawline and circled his lips. His face was creased enough that Nate wondered whether he dyed his hair to hide his gray. The man wore white gloves and a loose coat fancifully embroidered with many colors.

“Can I get you anything?” Cleon asked respectfully.

The man waved him away, then indicated the only other chair in the room to Nate. Cleon closed the door, and Nate sat facing the man across the flimsy table.

“I understand you won a jet stamp,” the man said in a syrupy voice.

“That’s right,” Nathan said cautiously.

The man leaned forward, extending a gloved hand. “We haven’t been introduced. I’m Jonas White.”

“Nate. Nathan Sutter.” Nate shook his hand.

“Rhymes with *stutter*. You may have known my sister. Belinda?”

Nate was unsure how to reply. “You’re related to Belinda White?”

“Only by blood.”

“She opened that candy shop in Colson,” Nate said, hoping his voice sounded neutral.

“And then mysteriously vanished. I can tell you’re tense, Nate. You should be. I’ve spoken with a source close to the incident. You were involved. Another magician took possession of the candy shop—Sebastian Stott. Are you working for him?”

“I know him,” Nate said. “He’s given me some candy. I don’t work for him.”

“Good to hear,” Jonas said. “Whether or not you’re telling the truth, if I let you keep that stamp, you’ll work for me.”

“I thought I owned the stamp.”

“Let me rephrase,” Jonas amended. “If I grant access to the ink that will make that stamp mean something, you will work for me.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m a treasure hunter, Nate, and I could use some help.”

“What kind of treasure?”

“Not water from the Fountain of Youth,” Jonas assured him. “That well has run dry, at least around these parts. No, I’m looking for an older, more significant prize. Have you heard of the mage Iwa Iza?”

“No.”

“Unsurprising. He lived ages ago. His people are no more. His language

went extinct long before Europeans discovered this continent. But he left a unique treasure behind.”

“What is it?”

“The details are vague. But the prowess of Iwa Iza is renowned among magicians. He used his power to protect his people and the natural world they admired. A few of his inimitable creations have survived, but his masterwork was called Uweya, and it is hidden somewhere in this area.”

“Uweya?”

“That may not even be the correct pronunciation,” Jonas said. “The language is lost. I can offer no translation. But I’m here to follow some clues that might lead us to Iwa Iza’s masterpiece. Many have sought Uweya. Hanaver Mills was involved in the hunt. Success eluded him, but he searched here for years, which is why he hid his water from the Fountain of Youth in this vicinity. I gleaned some insights from his failures, and from the fruitless efforts of many others. I am finally closing in on my prize. Would you like to become involved?”

“Sounds interesting,” Nate said. He hoped he didn’t seem too eager.

“More than interesting,” Jonas promised. “The hunt will be challenging, frightening, astonishing, and perhaps even deadly. It will provide a once-in-a-lifetime chance to experience the miraculous. The relics of Iwa Iza are among our most potent talismans of protection and healing, guarded alongside other wonders by the Unseen Magi. By all accounts, Uweya should surpass his other creations in splendor and power.”

“You want Uweya so you can help people?” Nate asked, trying not to sound doubtful.

“Iwa Iza devoted his life to uplifting his followers and protecting the natural world. Uweya is allegedly his crowning achievement. Yet it does no good while lost.”

Nate folded his arms. “What exactly am I agreeing to do?”

“To become one of my Jets,” Jonas said, producing a pad of ink in a wooden case. “The power of the stamp should remain in full effect for two days. Over the third day, the enchantment will dwindle to nothing. I will stamp you once for making the purchase with your tickets. Renewing the stamp depends on my receiving your cooperation. If you do not wish to join the club, I will offer a jet stamp to another and deny you access to the ink.”

“I’ll be the last to join?” Nate checked.

“You would complete the club. Each club will have four members.”

“That’s a lot of kids,” Nate said.

Jonas shrugged. “There will be multiple stages to finding Uweya. The clubs will compete against each other. You’ll learn the details later. The winning club

will have the honor of retrieving Uweya.”

“You’ll accept me if I commit?” Nate asked.

“You worry that I would deny you because of your involvement with Belinda. I am bound to my sister by blood, but she is no friend of mine. I was always much fonder of my other sister, Camilla. Belinda’s disappearance helped spawn this opportunity for me. She was also pursuing Uweya. Acquiring water from the Fountain of Youth was merely a step along that path. By foiling her, Nate, you aided me immeasurably.”

Nate frowned. Something was off. Why was Jonas making this so easy? “You mentioned you were worried I might be involved with other magicians. If I helped stop Belinda, doesn’t that make me a potential threat?”

Jonas laughed, tapping the side of the inkpad with one finger. “If I can’t handle the hazards posed by a child, I should pack up and go home. Don’t overestimate yourself. I’ll grant that you’re probably more capable than many others your age. I need capable people to find this treasure. It will not be simple. It is quite possible that all of my clubs will fail and I will have to start again from scratch. You let me worry about the threat you pose. I’ll take measures to protect my interests. All you really need to know is that I’m willing to accept the risks if you’re willing to work with me.”

Nate considered the insultingly frank response. Jonas White’s open attitude made Nate hungry for information. He felt tempted to ask about Mozag and John Dart, but worried it would push the magician too far. If he worked for Jonas, he would sooner or later end up in a position to learn about his captured friends. “All right. I’ll be a Jet.”

“Just like *West Side Story!*” Jonas gushed. “Hand over the stamp and hold out your hand.”

Nate obeyed. Jonas pressed the stamp against the inkpad, then stamped the back of Nate’s hand. Tingles rushed up his arm and spread across his body.

“Welcome to the team.” Jonas grinned.

Nate looked at the simple jet insignia on his hand. Something had changed, but he couldn’t quite recognize the difference.

“Try to fly,” Jonas prompted.

Nate stood, and his feet rose off the floor. He levitated a few feet into the air. He hovered, looking down at Jonas in surprise. It felt as natural as walking. He swerved to the left, then back to the right. Deciding where to go felt as simple as commanding his arms to move or his fingers to grasp. The force suspending him in the air existed throughout his body but seemed centered in his chest. Nate slowly dropped back to the ground.

“Ever experience anything like it?” Jonas asked.

“No,” Nate replied.

“I can’t tell you I’m surprised,” Jonas chuckled. “I’m a perfectionist. Are you a perfectionist, Nate?”

“I try to do good work,” Nate said. “I like to win.”

“I didn’t think so,” Jonas said smugly. “Most people refer to perfectionism much too casually. Being a perfectionist has advantages and drawbacks. My enhancers are not exceptionally diverse. Lesser magicians have broader catalogs. But my creations work unusually well for an uncommon amount of time. For example, real flight is a very difficult enhancement to produce. As a Jet, you will benefit from my thoroughness.”

“It feels amazing,” Nate said, impressed by the new ability. “I’ve had dreams about flying. Sometimes it’s like swimming clumsily through the air. Other times I can zoom around however I want. This feels like my best dreams.”

“Wait until you try it outside,” Jonas said. “I can imagine nothing more exhilarating. Makes me wish I were young enough to use it. A word of caution: You have the ability to fly, but your body is no stronger than usual. In a car, you have a metal shell to protect you in a crash. A motorcyclist has much less protection. Think of yourself as a flying motorcyclist.”

“I could really get hurt,” Nate realized.

“There are limits to how fast you can fly,” Jonas said. “But you can go plenty fast enough to get killed.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” Nate replied.

“Take care not to use any other magic while the stamp is in effect,” Jonas cautioned. “The magic involved with flight is delicate. Attempting to mix in other magic could prove disastrous.”

“Good to know.”

“You’re not new to magical enhancers,” Jonas said. “That could work either for or against you. Don’t take any of this lightly. To seal our agreement, the day after tomorrow you must bring me an inanimate object to which you feel a strong attachment.”

“Like what?”

“A stuffed animal. A book. A trophy. A photograph. I have the ability to measure your attachment to the item. If you comply, I will restamp you every other day. If the connection between you and the object isn’t strong enough, you will not get restamped.”

“Will you keep the object?”

“For as long as our association lasts.”

“Do I need to bring something every time I get stamped?”

“Just next time,” Jonas said. “Are you ready to meet your fellow Jets?”

Together you are the first complete group of four.”

“Sure,” Nate said, knowing that he had met all of them already.

Jonas rose and crossed to the far door. He moved slowly, as if ill or arthritic. When he opened the door, three kids came through—Chris, Risa, and Lindy.

Nate gaped in surprise at his friend. “Lindy?” His gaze darted to Jonas and back to Lindy. She might appear young, but surely Jonas had recognized his sister! What had transpired between them? What had he told her?

Lindy smiled sheepishly. “I hoped it would be one of you guys. I was worried Roman would beat you.”

“Thanks a lot, Nate,” Chris grunted, shaking his head.

Glaring, Risa took an angry step toward Nate. “Did you shut out Roman on purpose? He’s been working so hard for this! He even helped you! He thought you’d make a good teammate.”

“Lindy was never part of the plan,” Nate explained hastily, hoping they would believe him. “She acted alone. She wasn’t even supposed to come to the arcade! Todd wouldn’t reveal who had the third stamp. I assumed it was Roman. I didn’t even know that Lindy was trying for a stamp.”

“I don’t really care how it happened,” Chris said. “Together, you two stole his stamp.”

“Now, now,” Jonas chided. “This is a competition. Nobody has a claim on any stamp until they earn the tickets and trade for one. Chris, your friend Roman came close, but these two finished ahead of him. There are other stamps he can choose from.”

“How’d she earn the tickets?” Risa grumbled. “I’ve never seen her playing at Arcadeland.”

“She won’t talk about it,” Chris said.

“Perhaps she accomplished the task more cleverly than you,” Jonas replied serenely. “Do you imagine that I owe you an explanation? Some days I wish that children had no tongues. Life would be less wearisome if the power of speech were withheld for the first forty years. How Lindy succeeded is not your concern. With four members, your club is complete. If you wish to remain Jets, learn to get along. If not, feel free to join the rest of humanity in their mediocrity.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you,” Chris backpedaled.

“Which makes it so much more offensive,” Jonas yawned. “The four clubs will soon compete against each other. The winners will keep their stamps. The losers won’t. Before you know it, Roman and others will try to take your stamps away. I’ll be interested to see how your foursome measures up.”

Chris folded his arms and stared at the ground. Risa glowered. But they

kept quiet.

Nate glanced at Lindy. She and Jonas were not acknowledging each other as more than new acquaintances. Either she didn't know they were siblings or she was doing a good job covering it up. Surely he knew? And if he knew, he probably would have told her, right? But Nate couldn't ask about it in front of her, in case she didn't know. And he supposed there was a small chance that Jonas didn't know either. Maybe they hadn't been together much as children.

Jonas pointed at Nate. "He just received his stamp. Lindy got hers last night, when I refreshed Chris and Risa. I'll restamp you all again the morning after next. Come at nine. Until then, I suggest you train together. You have the ability to fly, but practice will be required to fly well and to work as a team. Any questions?"

Nate couldn't think of any questions not involving Mozag or John Dart.

"A friendly reminder," Jonas continued. "If you tell any prospective candidates about what the stamps can do, you will lose all privileges and your slot will be filled by another. You have no right to let magical secrets spill into the nonmagical world. Don't test me. I'll know. I have many ways of gathering information. Keep your abilities private. That is all."

Jonas shuffled over to his chair and sat.

"Come on," Chris said. "I'll show you where we practice."

"One more thing, Nate," Jonas said. "You'll want to avoid my nacho cheese. It has a numbing effect on the ability to use and perceive magic. Old family recipe. The people at my concession counter know to keep it away from my candidates. They'll use other cheese for you. But don't try any if a family member brings some home."

"Family member?" Nate asked.

"You should encourage your family to sample it," Jonas said. "The cheese will simplify things for you, free you up to pursue your new opportunities." He waved a casual hand. "Dismissed."

Nate followed the others out of the room. They passed through a break room with a few vending machines, a sink, a microwave, some cupboards, and a few tables. One employee sat reading a hiking magazine. Another nibbled at a burrito.

Beyond the room they passed into a hall. Nate walked beside Lindy. "Are you all right?" he muttered.

"I'm fine," Lindy said.

"Your dad has been worried," Nate told her.

She winced a little. "I slept in one of the little tunnels at the Monument Park playground. It wasn't comfortable. I'll go home tonight. Not much he can do

now.”

“Except ground you forever,” Nate pointed out.

“It’s hard to ground somebody who can fly,” Lindy said.

They reached a door that led directly outside. The far side of the door held an EMPLOYEES ONLY sign. Across the patio, a group of teenagers were putting at a hole designed to look like Stonehenge.

“You ran away from home?” Risa asked Lindy.

“Maybe,” Lindy said.

“Lindy hasn’t been very talkative,” Chris told Nate.

“She’s probably not sure whether she can trust you,” Nate replied. “Which is probably smart.”

Chris shrugged. “Like I care. Instead of one team of four, maybe we can be two teams of two.”

“Fine with me,” Lindy said.

“You heard Mr. White,” Risa said. “If we don’t work together, the other teams will beat us and we’ll lose our stamps. We need to make the best of this.”

“Then let’s go,” Chris said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “My friends know I just received my stamp.”

“So?” Risa asked.

“We watch out for each other,” Nate said. “If I don’t come back, they might freak out. Let me go tell them that I’m okay, then I’ll catch up.”

“We’ll catch up,” Lindy added. “You guys can go ahead. I’ll show him the way.”

“Fine, but don’t slip up and spill any secrets,” Chris said. “Mr. White is serious about keeping this quiet.”

“Believe me, I get it,” Nate replied. “See you soon.”

Chris and Risa walked away. Nate and Lindy started looping around Arcadeland toward one of the regular entrances. Before they reached the doors, Nate checked that Chris and Risa were out of sight, then pulled Lindy to a halt.

“So what happened?” he asked.

Lindy glanced around. “Nobody included me, so I included myself.”

“How did you win 50,000 tickets so quickly?”

“Who says I won them?”

Nate hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Katie Sung asked me about stolen tickets.”

“You talked to her too?”

“She let you get away with it?”

Lindy leaned against the wall. “She was mad. After I traded for the stamp, they brought me to her. She told me how their cameras never showed me

winning a single ticket. She told me seven rolls of 8,000 tickets had been stolen the night before.”

“You stole them?”

“I didn’t admit it. Not to her. I told her maybe I was wearing a disguise when I was here playing. I told her I was tricky.”

“But you stole them.”

Lindy looked Nate in the eye. “You know I see differently from most people.”

“Right.”

“I can usually see through walls and floors, at least for a ways. But a lot of Arcadeland is shielded from my sight. I don’t know if they used magic or special materials, but I can’t see underground here, and I can’t see certain areas of the building.”

“Okay,” Nate said.

“It made me curious. After Pigeon told me about Arcadeland, I came and checked it out.”

“Pigeon told you?” Nate cried.

She nodded. “I didn’t try to enter the arcade. I just roamed the outside of the building. I noticed that the storage room where they keep their prize tickets wasn’t shielded from my sight. I thought it meant that whatever was behind the shielded walls and floors must be pretty important.”

“Because you would think they would protect their prize tickets,” Nate said. “Makes sense. Maybe John Dart or Mozag are behind some of those walls.”

“The thought had occurred to me. Anyhow, after talking to Pigeon, I realized that those tickets were the key to getting a stamp, and the stamps were the key to gathering information.”

“He told you that?” Nate exclaimed.

“Keep it down,” Lindy scolded, glancing around. “Yes, he told me after I guilted him by explaining how left out I was feeling.”

“You took advantage of him.”

“Just his kindness. I really do like him, largely because of his kindness.”

“Go on.”

“I know where Dad keeps the Mirror Mints that Mrs. White left behind. He guards them pretty carefully because he hasn’t figured out how to produce more, even though he has her notes on the subject. Anyhow, the storeroom with the tickets had a full-length mirror. I went through a mirror near Arcadeland. When I came out into the storeroom, I heard an alarm go off. Somehow they had detected me. I worked quickly. Getting the tickets out was simple. I brought them in through one mirror and took them out through the other.”

“Smooth,” Nate complimented. “Fifty-six thousand tickets.”

“They were heavy. I unwound them and ripped them apart so it would look like I’d won them at lots of different games. But they knew I hadn’t because I never showed up on their cameras. The security at Arcadeland isn’t just for show. They pay attention.”

“Not well enough.”

Lindy giggled. “Katie was upset. I think she was embarrassed that a kid stole tickets that she should have protected. Thankfully, Mr. White intervened.”

“What did he do?” Nate asked, still wondering whether Jonas had revealed her true identity.

“He interviewed me. He told me he didn’t mind that I stole the tickets. He just wanted to know how. I told him about the Mirror Mints. He thought I was resourceful. He told me that in his opinion I had earned the tickets because getting them was difficult and I got away clean. Of course, he mentioned that he would be removing all mirrors from the more private portions of his arcade. But he let me keep the stamp!”

“I’m impressed,” Nate said honestly.

“You guys should have involved me from the start. I thought we Blue Falcons were supposed to stick together.”

“True,” Nate said. “But we didn’t want to disrespect Mr. Stott.”

“I know. I didn’t want to either. But with John and Mozag in trouble, I felt like I needed to help. I knew I could contribute.”

“What do you think about Jonas White?” Nate asked, trying not to give the question special significance.

“I wondered if he might be related to Mrs. White who owned the candy shop,” Lindy said. “I mean, they’re both magicians, and he set up his arcade so close to where she set up her shop. I didn’t ask, though. I was worried it might seem suspicious.”

“He’s her brother,” Nate said, figuring she would find out eventually. “He knows I was around when Mrs. White went missing. He mentioned it. But he didn’t make a big deal about it. I guess he wasn’t very close to her.”

“He gave me the benefit of the doubt too,” Lindy said. “He knew about Mr. Stott. Jonas connected me to him after I mentioned the Mirror Mints. But Jonas didn’t seem overly concerned that I live with him.”

“He must be pretty confident about his plan,” Nate speculated.

“Or his security,” Lindy said.

“Well, Lindy, I feel a little bad about shutting out Roman, but I’m glad there’s at least one Jet I can trust.”

She smiled. “I’m glad you got the stamp ahead of him. Spying is bad

enough without also feeling lonely.”

Nate nodded toward the doors. “Should we go talk to the others?”

“Sure.”

They walked together through the doors and quickly found Trevor loitering, his eyes on an EMPLOYEES ONLY door. Trevor signaled Pigeon, who hurried over.

“Lindy!” Pigeon cried. “Where have you been? Mr. Stott is so worried.”

“I’m sorry, Pidge. I couldn’t handle being ordered to keep out of this. I’m a Jet now.”

“What?” he exclaimed.

“She got the third stamp, I got the fourth,” Nate explained. “Long story, and we can’t talk long. Is Summer already in there?”

“You just missed her,” Trevor said.

“She’s going to meet the owner of Arcadeland, Jonas White. He’s Mrs. White’s brother.”

Pigeon gasped. “Is he here for revenge?”

Nate forced himself not to look at Lindy. “Doesn’t seem that way. He wasn’t very friendly with his sister. But he’s here for a purpose. I can’t say too much. We’re supposed to go practice with Chris and Risa.”

“Practice what?” Trevor pressed.

“I’m not allowed to explain,” Nate said. “You’ll find out soon. Earn the stamps, then you’ll see.”

“You really won’t say?” Trevor asked, looking a little wounded.

“Just to be safe,” Nate continued in a loud whisper. “Jonas set some firm rules about what we can tell others. I’m in no hurry to break them—not yet, and especially not here. Let me see. What *can* I say? Summer and I won’t be much help with tickets tomorrow.”

Trevor looked even more perplexed. “You can’t come?”

Nate leaned closer. Pigeon leaned in too. Nate lowered his voice more. “I can’t risk mixing magic. Remember how we suspected the stamps would lead to candy? The stamps *are* the candy. They last about two days.”

Pigeon and Trevor looked sober as they digested the information.

“Summer will be taking off to practice too?” Pigeon asked.

“I guess,” Nate said. “Still, can’t hurt to keep an eye on her. Hey, I’ve got to go. The others are waiting for us. I don’t want to make them suspicious.”

Trevor nodded. “Okay, get out of here. We’ll pass on what info we have.”

“When will we see you?” Pigeon asked, eyes on Lindy.

“Tell my dad I’ll be home tonight,” Lindy said. “Tell him I need him to be understanding.”

“I’ll tell him,” Pigeon promised.

“We’ll talk later,” Nate told Trevor. “This will make more sense after you get your stamp.”

“I hope so,” Trevor replied.

Nate and Lindy backed away, then headed for the door.

Training



The training facility turned out to be a few blocks away inside a warehouse Jonas White had rented. Unimpressive on the outside except for its size, the facility contained many surprises inside. An assortment of gymnastics equipment filled one corner of the cavernous room, including parallel bars, a pommel horse, vaulting boards and tables, trampolines of diverse sizes, balance beams of different heights, mats for tumbling, climbing ropes, and a wide pit full of foam cubes. An indoor pool, built partially above ground and encircled by a wooden deck, dominated another corner of the room. A third quadrant held sporting equipment, including weight sets and punching bags, and featured multiple basketball hoops and a miniature soccer goal. The last corner of the huge warehouse was devoted to fighting, with a large wrestling mat and a full boxing ring. Along the walls hung gear for fencing, boxing, wrestling, and martial arts.

“Are we prepping for the Olympics?” Nate asked as he and Lindy entered. His voice echoed slightly in the vast space.

“I couldn’t believe it either,” Lindy replied. “It’s all for us.”

“Just the Jets?”

“All four clubs,” Chris answered, soaring down from above the entrance with Risa. “The other kids don’t come here much. I expect more will show once their clubs fill up.”

“We’re free to fly in here,” Risa said. “We don’t risk it much outside, except at night.”

“It’s pretty awesome,” Lindy told Nate.

“I’m excited to go for it,” Nate said. Ever since hovering in the room with Jonas White, he had let the ability lie dormant, all the while aware that the potential resided within him.

“Watch your speed,” Chris cautioned. “It takes some room to stop or turn. If you’re not careful, you’ll get flattened against a wall.”

Nate willed himself into the air, and up he went. It took no more effort than for a healthy person at rest to start running. The sensation was quite different than with Moon Rocks. Using Moon Rocks, he jumped, and physics controlled his trajectory until he collided with something. Now, he could swerve in any direction as desired.

The tall ceiling in the warehouse allowed Nate to soar high above the floor. The height bothered him a little, but Moon Rocks had helped train him not to freak out in lofty places. He picked up some speed, swooping down, then curved back up. As he changed direction at a greater speed than before, he felt what Chris had meant about turning. Nate could will himself to turn, but his speed limited how sharply. It was like turning while on a bike—the higher the speed, the more gradual the turn needed to be.

Nate also practiced speeding up and stopping. Again, like with his bike, he needed some space to accelerate and decelerate. Nate found that if he turned as he stopped, he could kill his momentum more effectively.

Air whooshed by as Nate soared around the room making lazy figure eights. The sensation was by far the most exhilarating he had ever felt. He extended one arm ahead of himself, partly because it felt natural, partly in case he needed to ward off a collision. As he practiced turning more sharply at higher speeds, he felt g-forces straining his body, like when rounding a curve on a fast roller coaster.

Lindy, Chris, and Risa glided through the air around him. Lindy was the most tentative, Risa the most aggressive, swooshing along within inches of the walls, ceiling, and floor.

“You’re catching on fast,” Chris commented, soaring alongside Nate.

“Now that I’m doing it, flying feels pretty natural,” Nate said.

Chris grinned. He slowed, and Nate came to a stop beside him, fifteen feet above the floor. “Risa and I have talked about the same thing. It feels like we had this power all along, and Mr. White just woke it up.”

“Have you had flying dreams?” Nate asked.

“Sure.”

“It’s sort of like that’s how I got my practice.”

“Just wait,” Chris said. “Risa and I have had flying dreams practically nonstop since all of this started. Once I woke up pressed to the ceiling in my room.”

“How long ago did you get your stamp?”

“More than two weeks. I had been hanging around the arcade a lot, and Todd drew my attention to the stamps. After I earned one, I told Risa and Roman they had to get their own. She earned hers quickly, but Roman got grounded, and

then you guys showed up.”

“I really am sorry about him missing a jet stamp,” Nate said.

“I believe you,” Chris said hesitantly. “I’m not looking forward to competing against Roman. He’s going to be mad, and the kid knows how to win.”

“Some of my friends will be against us too,” Nate said. “Should keep things interesting.”

“Check it out,” Chris said, pointing.

Risa was inserting poles into sockets around the room in the walls, ceiling, and floor. Each pole held a ring.

“What’s with the rings?” Nate asked.

“Training exercise,” Chris said. “It’s one thing to fly, and another to do stuff while you’re flying. The rings are good practice. I also like playing catch. When you’re flying around, it’s harder than you might guess.”

“Is this what you guys do mostly?” Nate asked. “Fly around in here? Train and stuff?”

“Mostly,” Chris replied. “Mr. White has sent us on a couple of errands lately. We get something for him, and he pays us well.”

“Pays you with what?”

“Money.”

“Right. Are you stealing stuff?”

“Sort of,” Chris admitted. “But he isn’t going to keep it. We’re just borrowing things he needs for his treasure hunt. He promised to return it all in the end.”

Nate remembered Mrs. White sending them to “borrow” items for her. She had sometimes pretended they were recovering family heirlooms. “What have you gotten?”

“A book from a museum near Sacramento,” Chris said.

“Sacramento? That’s pretty far.”

“Not so far when you’re flying,” Chris explained. “We can get up to around a hundred miles per hour in the open sky. We went at night, of course. We had night vision goggles. You’d be surprised how easily you can nab stuff when you can fly. We set off some alarms, but none of the guards or police had a chance.”

“What else have you taken?” Nate probed.

“An old doll from a mansion near San Anselmo, in Marin County.”

“A doll?”

“An ancient one like you might see at a museum. It was made of wood and carved all weird.”

“Native American?”

“Probably. We didn’t study it. We just snatched it. Mr. White will give it back later. We left \$10,000 as a rental fee.”

“They rented it to you?” Nate asked.

“We didn’t ask permission. Mr. White paid us a bunch, too, since it wasn’t directly part of the treasure hunt. We were helping with his preparations.”

“Think we’ll get more of those assignments?” Nate wondered.

“I don’t know,” Chris said. “The last two times it came as a surprise.”

Risa glided over to them, handing Nate a short wooden baton.

“What’s this?” Nate asked.

“Use it to collect the rings,” she said. “They’re clamped loosely to the poles. They’ll pop off with a little force. See how quickly you can round them up.”

Nate rubbed his hands together. “Are you going to time me?”

Producing a stopwatch, Risa gave a nod. “Let’s get started.”

When Summer entered the training facility with a short, freckly kid, Nate was playing catch with the three other Jets. They used a black, undersized football. Risa could throw and catch almost as well as Chris, but Lindy was practically hopeless, catching fewer than one in ten of the balls thrown her way.

Nate hardly dropped any. It had not taken him long to learn to anticipate the trajectory of the ball and to get into position for just about any throw that came near him. He loved when the football was a little ahead of him and he could accelerate to come alongside it, then pluck the ball out of the air almost as if it were standing still. Once he glanced off the wall fairly hard, missing a catch, and once he narrowly avoided colliding with the floor, swooping up just in time, the toes of his shoes grazing blue gymnastics mats.

“Wow,” Summer called from the floor of the facility. “I’ve never seen a flock of kids before!”

Nate, Chris, Risa, and Lindy landed near Summer and her companion.

“Hi, Derek,” Chris said. “I see you found a friend.”

“Two Tanks are better than one,” Derek replied.

“You’re a Jet, Lindy?” Summer asked in surprise.

“I worked at it on my own,” Lindy explained.

Risa looked around. “I have a feeling this place will start getting busy.”

“Todd told me that a lot of kids are getting close to enough tickets for a stamp,” Derek said. “You guys playing catch?” He held up his hands for the ball.

Risa handed it over.

“Go long,” Derek said.

Chris and Risa streaked toward the far corner of the room. Derek made an

amazing throw, the ball streaking up toward the far corner of the huge warehouse with hardly any arc. Chris reached to make the catch, but the ball slapped off his hands and into the wall. Risa curved down and caught the football before it struck the floor.

Nate looked at Derek with new respect. He doubted whether the strongest NFL quarterback could have thrown the ball so hard. "I guess being a Tank makes you stronger?"

Summer leaned close to him. "It's like an Ironhide, plus you weigh more, plus you're stronger. And it lasts for two days."

"How strong?" Nate asked.

Summer shrugged. "Try to push me."

Nate placed a hand on each of Summer's shoulders and shoved. Instead of her moving, he pushed himself away, as if he had shoved a wall. Summer smirked.

"You look the same," Nate said, surprised.

"I didn't get bigger," Summer said. "But I weigh a lot more, and I'm scary strong."

"How strong?" Nate repeated.

"Fly up to the ceiling."

Nate turned and started to soar upward. A hand gripped his ankle with painful tightness, and his upward progress stopped. He put everything he had into flying up, but didn't go anywhere.

He glanced back at Summer. "So you can hold me down. But I'm not sure I could carry your weight even if you weren't a Tank."

"Are you calling me chubby?" Summer accused.

"No," Nate said. "I'm just not sure how much extra weight I can carry while flying."

Derek walked over holding a barbell. "Two 45-pound plates on each side," he said. "Plus the bar weighs 45. That's a total of 225."

He tossed the barbell to Summer, who caught it easily. She lifted it over her head. "This isn't bad," she reported. "Kind of heavy. I could do more." She set it down.

Nate bent and tried to pick it up. The barbell felt fused to the floor. He couldn't lift it at all, although he could roll it back and forth.

Nate straightened, looking at Derek. "Can you lift a car?"

"The back end of a small one. But that feels really heavy. With Summer helping we might be able to lift a small one completely off the ground."

"So you're not strong like a superhero," Nate clarified.

"Not really," Derek said. "But we can take punishment like a superhero."

Still, I'm not a big kid, but it would probably take the strongest man alive to challenge me at arm wrestling."

"I'm impressed," Nate said. "Do you guys shoot cannonballs, too?"

"Do you launch air-to-surface missiles?" Summer countered.

Nate shook his head. "I wish we were a little more durable. We have to be careful flying or we could really get hurt."

"You better be careful if you go up against the Tanks," Derek warned with a smile. "You might get hurt that way, too."

Parked near an office supply store, Vincent, Ziggy, Trevor, and Pigeon huddled together in the white van. Trevor and Pigeon munched on the donuts Ziggy had provided.

"Jonas White?" Vincent said. "He normally keeps to the shadows. Not a lot is known about him. I suppose we should have kept him higher on our suspect list. After all, his sister was here last year. But he has never been known to partner with his sister, and although we suspect that he's powerful, he has stayed inactive for decades."

"Sometimes guys like him bide their time," Ziggy said. "They're powerful, but they've learned patience. They marshal their resources and wait for a big score. Remember Vadik Baskov?"

Victor snorted. "Good point."

"What did he do?" Pigeon wondered.

"He stole the Hope Diamond," Victor said.

"From the Smithsonian?" Pigeon exclaimed.

"This was before the Smithsonian had it," Ziggy said.

"We returned it to the rightful owner," Victor added.

"How long have you guys been doing this?" Trevor wondered.

"Almost a century," Ziggy replied.

"We're straying off topic," Victor said.

"Right," Ziggy said. "Jonas White. What else did you learn?"

"Nate told us that the stamps themselves have power," Trevor said. "He was worried about sharing details."

"Summer seemed nervous too," Pigeon said. "She came by briefly after she finished with Jonas. She said he was planning a treasure hunt."

"Treasure hunt?" Victor repeated. "What could he be after?"

"That's a question for Mozag," Ziggy replied. "I'm not sure what a magician might want around here."

"What else do you guys know about Jonas White?" Pigeon asked.

"Almost nothing," Victor said. "Again, it would be nice to ask Mozag. I

know that Jonas White has been around since long before our time, which means he's no featherweight. I'm not sure where he comes from or what his specialties might be."

"We looked into the nachos," Ziggy said. "They've magically tampered with the cheese. We're not experts at magical formulas, but we think the cheese is like the white fudge from John's report on Belinda White. The cheese is addictive and numbs the ability of those who eat it to perceive the supernatural."

"We think it might also be designed to reactivate any old white fudge addictions," Victor added. "We'll confirm more as we continue to monitor the situation. Certainly stay away from it."

"We will," Trevor said. "And we'll let you know more after we earn our stamps tomorrow."

"Careful about that," Ziggy warned. "Jonas White is recruiting. He'll have ways of binding you to him. He won't want you sharing info with us."

"If all else fails, come to my house in the middle of the night," Pigeon said. "I'll talk to you."

"I hope so," Victor sighed.

Nate and Lindy flew beside each other through the night sky. Staying well above the rooftops, Nate doubted whether people on the ground could possibly identify them as anything more than small, quick shadows against the moon and stars. The cool night air swished against him. It felt exhilarating not to be limited by a ceiling or walls. If he wanted, he could soar up to where the air would become thin and freezing.

Nate didn't try anything too fancy because he didn't want to lose track of Lindy in the darkness. He had promised to stand by her when she returned home.

They glided down to the back of the candy shop, careful to land lightly. While practicing at the training facility, Nate had landed without much caution a couple of times, and it had felt like jumping from a moving vehicle.

The candy shop was closed. Lindy used a key to enter through the back door. She flipped a light switch. A moment after the lights came on, Mr. Stott hurried into the room. He looked from Nate to Lindy, his posture and expression showing his relief. He straightened up and tried to sound stern. "Where have you been, young lady?"

"I was the first to get a stamp," she said uncertainly, showing the back of her hand. "I'm a Jet. I can fly."

Although clearly surprised and upset, Mr. Stott was trying to keep calm. "I was very worried about you."

"Then maybe you should have let me help," Lindy said. "I wasn't going to

let my friends go into danger without me. I wasn't going to ignore John Dart and Mozag."

Mr. Stott rubbed his face. "This places me in a difficult position, Lindy."

"I'm a Jet too," Nate said. "We found out who owns Arcadeland."

"Who?"

"Jonas White."

Mr. Stott blanched. "Mrs. White's brother?"

Nate nodded.

"Oh, dear," Mr. Stott said. He started pacing. "This is . . . this is . . ." He stopped pacing and held out his arms. "Lindy, come here."

Lindy crossed to Mr. Stott, who enfolded her in a fierce hug.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Lindy said, her voice choked with emotion.

"I know," Mr. Stott said. "I placed you in a tough position. It's hard when I make a rule that conflicts with what you feel is right. I know you didn't disobey me casually."

"I didn't," she said.

"I'm glad that you're all right," Mr. Stott said. Ending the hug, he placed his hands on her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "You realize that you're in great danger."

"All of us are," she replied.

"We'll talk more later," Mr. Stott said. "Go wash up. I need to have some words with Nate in private."

"How much trouble am I in?" Lindy asked hesitantly.

"I should be the least of your worries," Mr. Stott said. "You're now involved in something truly perilous. I can't undo what you have done. But I'll do my best to help you."

She gave a nod and glanced at Nate. "Thanks for coming with me."

"Sure," he said.

She flew over to the stairway and glided up out of sight. Mr. Stott followed her with his eyes. He waited until he heard the door to their apartment open and close, then motioned for Nate to follow him to his private office.

Mr. Stott closed the door and stood near Nate, speaking in a low voice. "How long do the stamps last?"

"At least two days," Nate said. "Then I guess the power starts to fade."

"You have real flight?" Mr. Stott asked. "Like Peter Pan? Like Superman?"

"Yeah," Nate said.

"Does it tire you?"

"No, not at all," Nate realized. "Less than walking. I mean, you have to focus. If you crash you can get hurt, so you do have to concentrate. But I've

been flying most of the day, and my body isn't tired at all."

"Very potent magic," Mr. Stott said. "I doubt I could devise such an enhancement if I spent the rest of my days slaving on the project." His expression changed, becoming more concerned. "What has he told her?"

"Nothing," Nate said. "I'm not even sure if he knows."

"How could he not know?" Mr. Stott fretted. He folded his arms. "I suppose it's possible. Maybe so much time has passed. One sibling could be considerably older than the other. Or they might have been separated in their youth. But I suspect he must know. What is he after?"

"We're not supposed to tell," Nate said. "He's on a treasure hunt. Some great thingamajig made by a guy called Iwa Iza."

"Interesting," Mr. Stott said, stretching the word out. "He's looking for Uweya."

"That's the word he used," Nate said. "What is it?"

Mr. Stott gave a slow shrug, raising his hands vaguely. "A legend. Iwa Iza was a great mage who lived long, long ago. His creations interacted with the environment. He allegedly made a bowl that could summon a tornado, and a drum that could cause an earthquake. His greatest creation, Uweya, is shrouded in mystery. I know of it, but I know little about it. I'm not sure anyone does."

"Jonas must know something," Nate said.

"He is certainly behaving as though Uweya were more than a myth," Mr. Stott agreed. "I'll start researching the subject. Quietly, of course."

"What do we do about Lindy?" Nate asked.

Mr. Stott shook his head sadly. "Our options are limited. We could let the Battiatos take her away. They would have to imprison her. I expect such a course would destroy any chance of her being rehabilitated and living a normal life. Otherwise, with her in your stamp club and Jonas aware of her, we would just need to ride this out and see where it goes."

"She seems loyal to us," Nate said.

"Jonas could have a plan to turn her," Mr. Stott said. "I don't think he can undo the Clean Slate, but what do I know? I would have considered the flight enhancement he gave you virtually impossible. Would you mind if I studied the ink?"

"Go ahead," Nate said.

Mr. Stott stared at the back of Nate's hand. He examined it with a magnifying glass. He sniffed it. He rubbed it with a few cloths of different textures. "Interesting. I suppose I can do further studies on Lindy. Have you learned anything about John Dart?"

"There are many rooms at Arcadeland that Lindy can't see. We haven't had

much chance to investigate. Mr. Stott, you wouldn't turn Lindy over to the Battiatos?"

"No, not while she remains loyal to us. I'm glad you're in this Jet club with her. You need to keep an eye on her, Nate. If you have any misgivings . . ."

"You'll be the first to know," Nate assured him. "I like the new Lindy, but I'd rather throw her in jail for the rest of her life than have Belinda White back."

Simulcrist



By the following afternoon, the training facility had begun to feel crowded. Roman had joined the Tanks, Trevor had earned his racecar stamp, and, after receiving his submarine stamp, Pigeon showed up with a pretty blonde named Mindy. Nate and Summer had helped their friends earn tickets that morning, although the great majority were won by Trevor and Pigeon using Peak Performance.

While the other Jets took a water break, Nate hung out near the ceiling, watching as Summer, Roman, and Derek brutalized punching bags. Pigeon and his new teammate were in the pool. Since they hadn't surfaced for half an hour but still swam around like dolphins, they could obviously breathe underwater. Lacking fellow club members, Trevor zipped around the warehouse at astonishing speeds, trying out various activities alone. Nate was most impressed when Trevor grabbed a football and threw a long bomb to himself.

As Nate tried to assess how the Jets would fare against the other clubs, he had to admit that both the Tanks and the Racers intimidated him. If the Jets could stay in the sky, nobody would be able to touch them. But the speed of the Racers and the strength of the Tanks would be problematic on the ground or in confined areas.

The Subs didn't seem like much of a threat, unless an assignment had to be carried out underwater. Which probably meant that part of the treasure hunt would involve getting wet, or else why would Jonas have created sub stamps in the first place?

Before any of the other clubs had arrived, Nate and his teammates had experimented with how much weight they could carry while flying. The incident when Summer kept him grounded had left Nate concerned. He discovered that holding a 30-pound dumbbell in each hand was pretty close to his limit. The

exertion required to fly with that much weight felt like an uphill sprint, and his stability became erratic. Twenty-pound dumbbells required effort but weren't too bad, especially over short distances. He had hardly noticed any difficulty when carrying tens.

Chris had theorized that exerting themselves by carrying heavy weights might eventually allow them to handle higher maximum loads. Nate thought it was worth a try, but he suggested they shouldn't reveal their weakness by doing it in front of the other clubs. The rest of the Jets had agreed.

Roman had pointedly avoided acknowledging Chris, Risa, or Nate all afternoon. Nate had caught him staring a few times, but Roman had repeatedly averted his gaze. For the most part, he kept his head down and focused on training with Summer and Derek.

"Nate!" Chris called. "U-turn!"

Chris was flying his way clutching a long jump rope. Nate held up his hands and tried to mentally brace himself. He had come up with this idea earlier in the afternoon, and they had practiced it for the last hour.

Without slowing, Chris tossed one end of the rope to Nate, who caught it and focused on holding steady. Chris was doing his best to turn sharply, so Nate never pulled against his full weight, but the force was still almost enough to jerk the rope from his hands. Unable to remain completely stable, Nate hung on and managed to help Chris slingshot around in a much tighter turn than would have otherwise been possible.

"Good one!" Risa called. "That might have been the best yet!"

Chris flew over to hover near Nate. "Not bad."

"You caught me daydreaming," Nate replied. "Maybe the trick is to not pay attention. Hey, do you think we should talk to Roman?"

"I don't know," Risa said, drawing near with Lindy. "He's avoided us ever since we let him know the Jet stamps were gone."

"He was kind of a jerk," Chris said. "It made me feel a little better about him getting left out."

"If we're going to compete with him, we should try to clear the air," Nate said. "Those Tanks are strong. We don't want him hating us more than necessary. You guys are friends, right?"

"We know each other pretty well," Chris said.

"He and I have been friends since we were little," Risa said.

"Then Nate's right," Lindy agreed. "You should talk to him."

Risa sighed unenthusiastically, but nodded.

Nate led the way down to where Roman was throwing a large medicine ball in a triangle with Summer and Derek. In their hands the bulky exercise tool

might have weighed no more than a basketball. The Tanks paused as the Jets approached.

“Hi, Rome,” Risa said.

“Hey, guys,” Roman replied without much warmth. “What do you want?”

“We just hope there are no hard feelings about the jet stamps,” Chris said. “Nobody was trying to exclude you.”

“I know,” Roman said. “Summer told me how Lindy was earning stamps on her own. Nate didn’t know. It might have been a lucky break for me. Being a Tank feels really good. Even if I had the chance, I don’t think I’d switch.”

“I assumed it was you who had taken the second-to-last jet stamp,” Nate explained.

Roman waved away the comment. “I get it. I don’t blame you or Lindy. You and Summer and your other friends worked together to win tickets. If Chris and Risa had done that for me, I would have had my stamp days ago.”

“We weren’t sure if it was allowed,” Risa said uncomfortably.

“We had to train,” Chris said. “We gave you money.”

“You did,” Roman said. “It’s okay, I understand, I don’t hate you guys. I appreciate the money you shared. But things have definitely changed. We’re on different teams. It’ll be fun to beat you.”

“I guess that’s the idea,” Chris said, hands on his hips. “Good luck.”

“Keep doing that trick with the ropes,” Derek said. “I bet you guys could join Cirque du Soleil.”

“It’s not cool like medicine balls,” Nate fired back. “I thought they stopped making those things in 1905.”

Risa held up her hands like a peacemaker. “We don’t need to get nasty.”

“You guys do your thing, we’ll do ours,” Chris said. “Have fun on the ground.” He soared up into the air, spinning as he curved first left, then right, flying with impressive speed and precision.

Nate and the others followed suit, leaving the Tanks to stare up at them.

Under a pale moon, Nate, Trevor, Summer, Lindy, and Pigeon met behind the candy shop. It had been a hot day, and the night was warm.

“Sorry we couldn’t really talk earlier,” Summer said. “The other Tanks are really getting into the rivalry between the clubs.”

“Mindy is too,” Pigeon said.

“Everybody will,” Nate predicted. “But we need to remember our real purpose.”

“How do you like being a Sub?” Summer asked Pigeon.

“It’s pretty amazing when I’m in the water. I can breathe it just like air. And

swimming feels like flying. We might not move as fast as the Jets, but we can move way faster than a normal swimmer. I bet we could outswim sharks.”

“Anything else?” Trevor wondered. “Is it just that you swim well and breathe water?”

“There are little things,” Pigeon said. “I can feel where objects are positioned in the water around me without looking. Like an extra sense. And when I’m underwater, I feel a little stronger than normal. If you guys have to go against us in the water, you’ll be in trouble. Out of the water, the sub stamp doesn’t make much difference. Mindy is a competitive swimmer, so she’s in heaven.”

“What about you, Trevor?” Nate asked.

“I can be normal, like now, or I can go into an altered state where everything around me slows down. I call it race mode. I can slip in and out of it whenever I want. It’s really weird. It feels like I’m moving at normal speed, but everything else is three or four times slower. I’m sure that to you guys, it must look like I’m pretty fast.”

“That’s an understatement,” Lindy said.

“Any other benefits?” Pigeon asked.

Trevor shook his head. “I have an extra gear, a second altered state, where things get three or four times slower again. I still feel like I’m moving at normal speed, but it wears me out quickly. I can only stay in it for around thirty seconds.”

“Which would feel like three seconds or so to everybody else,” Pigeon calculated.

Trevor nodded. “Jonas told me that my body is reinforced to handle the stresses of high speeds. I guess that’s an extra perk.”

“Does the first altered state wear you out?” Summer asked.

“A little,” Trevor replied. “I can handle race mode for much longer than the fastest state before needing a rest, though.”

“We’ve all got impressive powers,” Nate said. “It could come in handy when we need to turn on Jonas.”

“The only downside is we can’t use any candy without risking side effects,” Pigeon said.

“I know,” Nate replied. “I wish I could use Peak Performance while flying. The result would be amazing.”

“Can you imagine?” Lindy gushed. “That would be so cool.”

“Even without other enhancements,” Pigeon said, “we have a good mix of powers. And they seem to be really stable.”

Trevor picked up a pebble and started tossing it from one hand to the other.

“What do you guys think about Jonas asking us to bring him something we treasure?”

“I’m not sure,” Summer said.

“Must be for some kind of magic,” Pigeon guessed.

“Are you guys going to do it?” Trevor wondered.

“Looks like we have to if we want to stay undercover,” Lindy said.

“I don’t love the idea,” Pigeon said. “Especially since I don’t know what he’s going to do with my jacket.”

“You’re bringing your leather jacket?” Summer asked. There was no doubting what jacket he meant. The studded leather jacket looked like something a tough biker would wear.

Pigeon shrugged. “I really like it, even though I never wear it anymore. I could tell most kids at school thought I looked like a poser.”

“You shouldn’t let other kids get to you like that,” Summer said. “They’d get used to it.”

“It just wasn’t worth it to me,” Pigeon said. “Besides, it’s summer now. I wouldn’t be using it anyways.”

“I wish we knew what Jonas plans to do with our stuff,” Trevor grumbled.

“I wish I knew what he did with John and Mozag,” Lindy said. “Unless we hand over something, we might never find out.”

“It’s true,” Nate said. “Our main goal is to find where they’re holding John and Mozag and to bust them out. We’ll probably have to take some risks to do it. You guys can decide for yourselves, but I’m planning to bring something to Jonas. Everyone keep alert. We need to start making more progress.” He stretched. “I’m getting tired. I’m about ready to call it a night.”

“Wait,” Trevor said, chucking his pebble into the bushes. “I need some help. It’s my mom’s birthday tomorrow. I’ve been so busy with all of this that I haven’t gotten her a present. What should I do? I’m going to get the look if I don’t have anything for her!”

“Coupon book,” Nate said without hesitation. “Works every time. They’re easy to make, and they cost practically nothing. Make coupons for a free hug, a free kiss—stuff she’ll like. Make some to sweep the floor, wash the dishes, walk the dog, whatever makes sense. Your mom will be really happy, and the best part is she’ll probably lose the coupons and forget about them. My mom has never actually used more than one or two.”

“Good call,” Trevor said.

“Beware, though,” Pigeon inserted. “I tried it and my mom kept the coupons in a special place. She used every single one. I began to suspect she made photocopies or something. They just kept coming.”

Summer giggled. "Counterfeit coupons."

"It wasn't the worst, but it added up to lots of chores," Pigeon said. "Make sure you put down stuff that you're willing to do."

Trevor looked thoughtful. "My mom is definitely the type who would love them but lose track of them. I'm going to try it."

"Good luck," Summer said. "We better get home."

Later that night, Pigeon and Diego crept into their front yard through the side gate. Pigeon winced when it clattered shut. After a few tense moments, the house remained dark and quiet.

"Do you smell anyone spying on us?" Pigeon asked.

"No," Diego replied. "But I can smell that you're nervous."

"I don't want my aunt to catch me," he replied. "And I don't want Jonas White to notice me sneaking info to his enemies."

"Far as I can tell, we're all clear."

Pigeon saw the white van parked down the street, lights off. He trotted there with Diego at his side. The door opened and Pigeon climbed in. Diego entered as well.

"No lights came on when you opened the door," Pigeon noticed.

"We made a few modifications," Ziggy replied.

"Thanks for coming," Victor said. "Learn anything new?"

Pigeon explained about their new powers and how they worked. He told how Jonas White wanted each of them to hand over a special item in order to continue in their respective clubs.

"That will come to no good," Ziggy said. "A magician would use such an item to establish some form of connection with you."

"If the item is handed over voluntarily, the potency would increase," Victor noted.

"Did you learn why he's here?" Ziggy asked. "What he's after?"

"He wants a treasure made by a guy called Iwa Iza."

"Iwa Iza?" Ziggy exclaimed.

"Do you know much about him?"

Ziggy shook his head and made a befuddled gesture. "He's a figure from history books. He lived, what, two thousand years ago?"

"At least," Victor said.

"I guess he made something called Uweya," Pigeon said.

"Never heard of it," Victor said.

"Me neither," Ziggy grumbled. "But we have access to books. We'll look into it."

“Anything else?” Victor asked.

“Jonas made it clear that we had better not work against him,” Pigeon said. “He threatened me if I showed my magic to anyone who didn’t know about it.”

“No magician wants to broadcast the existence of magic,” Ziggy said.

“And no magician with an agenda would smile at disloyalty,” Victor added. “Pigeon, after you hand over your special item, we should probably limit contact to emergencies. He may be able to watch you.”

“You’ve given us some terrific leads, kid,” Ziggy said. “Keep watching him. Try not to get into hot water. If you do, let us know.”

“We prepped some items for you,” Victor said, holding out his palm. In it rested five buttons. “Share these with your friends. Keep one on you, and we should be able to track you. If you get into the kind of trouble where you need us to come immediately, break it.”

“Thanks,” Pigeon said.

“These too,” Ziggy said, handing over a wooden box. Inside Pigeon found six sleek pistols. “Tranquilizer guns. Custom-made, top of the line. Very accurate and high-powered for pistols. Each holds six darts. Semiautomatic. There are several spare darts in the box. Share them, and don’t hesitate to use them in emergencies.”

“This is great,” Pigeon said.

“Do you have anything for dogs?” Diego asked. “Magic collar? Body armor?”

“The dog can talk,” Ziggy said.

“Brain Feed,” Pigeon explained. “Mr. Stott makes it. Diego is definitely on our side.”

“Sorry, pooch,” Victor said, scratching Diego behind the ears. “We’re all out of doggie gear.”

“I won’t hold it against you,” Diego said. “Especially if you keep scratching.”

“You two should beat it,” Ziggy suggested. “The longer you stay near us, the more danger you’re in. Jonas White will be keeping tabs on you, one way or another.”

“Thanks for the gear,” Pigeon said. “You think we can take these guys down?”

“We had better,” Victor said. “For all our sakes.”

Nate had decided on Zombie Nightmare Apocalypse IV as his special object. He had considered some trophies, a sock monkey that used to share his bed, and a few of the Zelda games. But in the end, the overall mayhem and

general replay value of ZNA IV had won out.

He waited next to Lindy near an EMPLOYEES ONLY door. Chris and Risa had yet to show up.

“You brought a stuffed flamingo?” Nate asked.

She held it up. The toy had more expression than Nate would expect on a bird. “It was the first thing Mr. Stott got for me,” Lindy explained. “I don’t have many favorite possessions. I hope I’m attached enough to it. I guess we’ll find out. You brought a video game?”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “I really like it. There are so many different ways to take out the zombies. You can win each level using lots of different strategies.”

“I don’t get video games,” Lindy admitted. “Wouldn’t you rather actually go do something than just pretend on a screen?”

“Where am I going to actually fight zombies?”

“Is that something you’d want to do?”

“Not in real life. But in a video game it rules. That’s the point. You can do crazy stuff, but nobody actually gets hurt.”

“Hey, guys,” Chris said, walking up with Risa. “What’s up?”

“Cleon told us to wait here,” Lindy said.

“Fair warning,” Risa muttered. “This part will be a little creepy.”

“What do you mean?” Nate asked.

“We can’t explain,” Chris replied. “You’ll see.”

“Have you had any flying dreams yet?” Risa asked.

“I did,” Lindy said. “I was up in the clouds.”

“I had a good one last night,” Risa said. “I was in a canyon in the desert, rescuing frogs.”

“Rescuing frogs?” Chris chuckled.

“I don’t know,” Risa replied defensively. “It was a dream. They were stuck up on these cliffs and I had to put them in a lake.”

“Were they slimy?” Lindy asked.

“Not really. They were cute.”

“That’s the worst dream ever,” Chris said.

“I haven’t had one yet,” Nate said. “A flying dream. At least not that I remember. Not since I’ve actually flown, I mean.”

The EMPLOYEES ONLY door opened and Cleon waved the four of them inside. He led them through some industrial halls to a different room than last time. He opened a door and extended an arm, inviting the kids inside.

Nate entered, then froze, staring at himself and Lindy rendered as life-sized wax figures. The wax sculptures flanked a desk where Jonas White sat waiting.

“Come inside,” Jonas invited. “Have you ever viewed yourselves in three

dimensions? Most people have not. Chris and Marisa had a chance on another occasion. Today Nate and Lindy get a turn.”

Nate approached his wax duplicate. It was exactly his height, and it wore the same outfit he had sported the last time he conversed with Jonas. He walked around it, getting a view from all sides. Lindy scrutinized her wax twin as well. Chris and Risa shared an amused look.

“What do you think?” Jonas asked.

“We should mass-produce these,” Nate said, tentatively touching the wax cheek. “I bet the ladies would love one.”

“Sadly, our plans do not involve placing your likeness in houses across the country,” Jonas said.

“Why did you make these?” Lindy asked.

“Every magician has his specialties,” Jonas said humbly. “I am a Simulcrist.”

“A what now?” Nate asked.

“A simulacrum is a representation of something,” Jonas explained. “A scarecrow, for example, is a simulacrum of a man used to frighten birds. These wax figures are simulacra of you two.”

“You made them?” Lindy asked.

Jonas held up a hand and affectionately considered his fingers. “I do have that talent, but alas, I lack the speed to have created these lifelike sculptures on such short notice. My apprentices produced them. They have a remarkable aptitude for working with wax. Nate, Lindy, the two of you will be the latest addition to my collection.”

“Why?” Nate probed.

“Do you suspect that my reasons are more than purely aesthetic?” Jonas asked. “If so, you would be correct. As a Simulcrist, I wish to establish a connection between you and your simulacrum. This connection will allow me to exact retribution should you elect to betray me.”

“Like a voodoo doll?” Nate asked.

“In theory, I suppose,” Jonas said. “Although there is no voodoo involved. I’m honestly not sure whether voodoo actually works.”

“But this does?” Lindy asked.

“Most assuredly,” Jonas said. “These simulacra will help ensure that you work with me, not against me. I have entrusted you with powerful enhancers. If you serve me faithfully, the simulacra will never be used to harm you. In fact, they can be used to help you. But if you choose not to serve me honorably—well, you should probably surrender your positions as Jets now and save all of us considerable unpleasantness.”

“This is why you need the items?” Nate asked.

“Nothing gets by you,” Jonas sneered. “The items will help establish the desired connection between you and your simulacrum. What have you brought me?”

Nate held up his video game. “Zombie Nightmare Apocalypse IV.”

“May I handle it?” Jonas asked.

Nate handed it over. Jonas closed his eyes, clutching it firmly. “I have sensed stronger connections, but this will suffice.”

“How do I know you’ll give it back?” Nate asked.

Jonas grinned. “I’ve been around a long time. If I kept every simulacrum I made, I’d need to store them in a football stadium. Once you have loyally served your purpose, your game will be returned, the connection between you and your simulacrum will be severed, and the simulacrum will be recycled.”

“Could I keep mine as a souvenir?” Nate tried.

“We could discuss the possibility when the time comes,” Jonas said. “I assume you intend to proceed? If either of you finds this arrangement unacceptable, our relationship ends here.”

Nate found it totally unacceptable. But if he walked away, how would he ever find John and Mozag? He glanced over at Lindy, who stared back at him uncertainly.

“Just do it,” Chris said. “We did. It’s no big deal. Are you really going to walk away from flying after all that work earning the stamp?”

“What can you do to us with the simulacrum?” Nate inquired.

“All sorts of thing,” Jonas said slowly. “The magicians who pioneered the manufacture of simulacra did so to help people. Simulacra were principally used to reduce pain or alleviate the symptoms of certain illnesses. Years of experimentation have shown that simulacra can be quite versatile. In addition to simulcry, I have also studied acupuncture for decades. The combination can produce some fascinating results.”

“You could hurt us?” Nate said.

Jonas grinned like a hangman who loved his job. “I could certainly harm you, yes. Inflicting pain is only one of my options. I could kill you. I could lower your inhibitions. I could make you thirsty. I could make you dizzy. I could create rushes of pleasure that would leave you pleading for more. Or I could simply cure your back pain.”

“That’s a lot of power to hand over to a stranger,” Lindy said.

“So is the power of flight,” Jonas argued. “So are the secrets I will share with you once the treasure hunt begins. The simulacra merely bring our shared risks into balance.”

Nate hated the idea of giving an enemy so much power over him. Even if he was smart and careful, it could end very badly. He wondered whether John would do it for him? He was pretty sure the answer was yes.

“All right,” Nate said. “But you had better keep your word.”

Jonas rubbed the video game between his hands. “If I failed to keep my promise as explained, the connection would weaken considerably. Of course, if you neglect to honor your end of the agreement, I will be within my rights to exact whatever revenge I deem appropriate.”

“Okay,” Lindy said. “I’ll do it too.”

Jonas accepted the pink flamingo. He held it pensively for a moment. “This will do.” He rose carefully. “Congratulations on becoming the newest additions to my waxworks. Now, who would like to refresh their stamps?”

The Hermit



After the weekend, Todd and Cleon showed up at the training facility unannounced. Nate and the Jets were playing catch using baseball mitts when the two men entered. The appearance marked the first time any Arcadeland employee had visited the facility.

All activity came to a halt. The four clubs were now all filled. A large girl had joined the Tanks, three girls had joined the Racers, and two boys had joined the Subs. Even so, demand for the stamps supposedly continued. None of the stamps were on display as prizes anymore, but Nate had heard that a couple of kids had already been turned away from attempting to claim some.

Todd motioned for the clubs to gather to him. The Jets swooped down, arriving before all but the Racers. The Subs got there last, totally dry despite having come from the pool.

“You’ve all heard about the treasure hunt,” Cleon announced. “The first phase is about to begin. It’ll pit the Jets against the Subs, with the competition beginning at sundown.”

“What about us?” Roman asked.

“Tanks and Racers have to sit this one out,” Todd said. “You’ll get your chance next time. If the Tanks or Racers interfere in this phase, they risk disqualification.”

“We’d lose our stamps?” Trevor checked.

“At least,” Cleon said. “If you’re going to believe anything I tell you, believe this: you don’t want Mr. White mad at you. Make him proud instead. Life can be sweet when he’s pleased.”

“What are we doing?” Nate asked.

Cleon pointed to Nate as if he had asked the right question. “The Jets or the Subs must secure an item called the Gate from a secretive wanderer known as

the Hermit. The Hermit is notoriously difficult to find, but Mr. White has already taken care of that for you. The Hermit currently resides aboard the USS *Striker*, a destroyer mothballed after World War II.”

“Mothballed?” Risa asked.

“Warships held in reserve,” Pigeon said. “They’re equipped for service but not in use. Many eventually get sold as scrap.”

“Nice job, professor,” Cleon said. “The *Striker* can be found on one of the waterways adjacent to the San Francisco Bay, not too far from here. I brought a map for each of the two clubs involved.”

Pigeon collected the map for the Subs, and Chris took the map for the Jets.

“This assignment may take some finesse,” Todd said. “The Hermit’s a wily old dude. He won’t give up the Gate easily. He has been known to bargain when cornered. He’ll probably try to flee. If he gets away, it will be a major annoyance to find him again. In that case, both clubs will lose their stamps.”

“What does the Gate look like?” Lindy wondered.

“We’re unsure,” Cleon said. “From sketchy descriptions, we assume it will be a model of a gate. Should be small enough to carry.”

“Tell the Hermit you want the Gate to Uweya,” Todd advised. “He’ll know what you’re after.”

“We know he has it with him?” Lindy asked.

“The Hermit moves around a lot,” Cleon said. “But he keeps his treasures close. Either he’ll have it on him or he’ll know where to find it.”

Todd held up a small drawstring bag. “Each club will get some of this to help you. It’s called Finder’s Dust. Just sprinkle it in the air, and the particles will be drawn to any magical items in the vicinity.”

“The effect has limits,” Cleon clarified. “It’ll find objects in a small room, but it won’t travel down the street and around the corner. Use a little at a time, focusing on suspicious areas.”

“The club that brings the Gate into Arcadeland wins the competition,” Todd said. “It doesn’t matter who does what along the way. We don’t care who works the hardest, who finds the Gate, or who snatches it. All we care about is who brings it to us. The losers will surrender their stamps to the winners.”

“These rules give the Jets an unfair advantage,” Pigeon said. “There’s no river near Arcadeland.”

“We’ve explained the task,” Cleon said. “The rest is up to you. Meet here at sundown. You’ll depart once it’s dark.”

“Wait,” Pigeon complained. “If we leave from here, the Jets will easily beat us to the ship. That will give them an even bigger advantage.”

Todd shrugged. “Mr. White made the rules. You Subs are quick in the

water. If I were you, I'd start looking for the nearest waterways that link to your destination. You guys have the rest of the day to prepare."

"I recommend searching the lockers in here," Cleon said. "You're welcome to take any gear you find. Just bring it back."

He and Cleon left the room.

"I wanted to take on the Jets," Roman complained loudly.

"The target is a ship out on the water," Summer said. "Jets and Subs probably make the most sense."

"I guess we'll get our chance," Roman said.

"Unless the Racers beat you first," Trevor said.

"We should plan," Chris said, looking at the map.

The different clubs started moving away from one another. Nate conferred with the other Jets, but the planning didn't impress him. Basically, they would fly to the place on the map and see what happened, adapting as necessary.

Nate glided over to where the Subs were getting back into the water. "Hey, Pidge."

Drew, another of the Subs, paused beside Pigeon, his eyes on Nate. Pigeon pointed to the pool. "Go ahead. Let me talk to Nate for a second."

Drew obeyed reluctantly. Nate stood near Pigeon, and they spoke with their voices lowered.

"Do you want me to throw it?" Pigeon murmured. "I could sabotage us."

"No," Nate said, somewhat surprised by the offer. "I was thinking we should both just do our best to win. I'm not sure it matters which of us stays in."

"It could matter a lot," Pigeon replied quietly. "I'm good at planning, but you're more clutch in emergencies. Plus, there are two of us on the Jets. Wouldn't it make more sense to keep you and Lindy involved?"

"Might make more sense to get her uninvolved," Nate said. "We still don't know if Jonas recognized her, or what he's planning if he did."

"I'm not sure she's any safer either way," Pigeon said. "If Jonas knows her secret, whether or not she's in one of his clubs probably won't matter. Look, I won't try hard to blow it for the Subs, but I won't go out of my way to win, either. Although it would be kind of fun to fly."

"We probably shouldn't talk for too long," Nate said.

"Right. We might not get a chance to chat more before sunset. Good luck."

"You too. Be careful. We don't know much about what we're up against." Nate flew away to rejoin the Jets, and Pigeon dove into the water.

As he soared away from the training center, Nate debated whether to switch on his night vision. Below him, the world had been simplified into a grid of

lights. The Jets flew well above the ground, hopefully high enough to avoid attention from people down below. Their black clothing helped them blend with the night sky. They all wore protective helmets, elbow pads, and knee pads.

Nate had brought the tranquilizer pistol that Pigeon had passed along from the Battiatos. Lindy had hers as well. Although the helmets were equipped for night vision, the moon was probably bright enough to help them get the job done. Besides, Lindy flew beside Nate, and he knew that she could see in the dark much better than any night vision device.

As planned, they flew to the freeway, then followed the opposing streams of headlights and taillights toward the first junction. Freeways would lead them most of the way to the desired inlet. Chris held the map.

Chris kept increasing their speed until they were moving faster than the cars below. The air remained warm after an uncomfortably hot day. It washed over Nate like a gale as he sped forward. Even at such a high speed, flying caused him no physical exhaustion.

After a few freeway junctions, they left the busy roads behind and flew toward a dark expanse of water. Silver moonlight reflected gently off the surface in places. Thanks to the moon, the *Striker* was not difficult to see, floating alone on the water as it had for years.

The Jets gathered a few hundred feet above the destroyer to confer. Although the waterway was wide, shore lights remained visible beyond the water on both sides.

“Seems quiet,” Chris said.

“I guess he’s not in a band,” Nate said.

Lindy rolled her eyes. “I don’t see any light.”

“Hopefully he’s asleep,” Risa replied.

“How long before the Subs get here?” Lindy wondered.

“We were hauling and we didn’t get lost,” Chris said. “Even if they found a ride to the nearest water, we’ve got to be like an hour ahead of them.”

“We can’t get too cocky,” Nate said. “They move through the water almost like how we fly. They might get here faster than we expect.”

“Not sooner than half an hour,” Chris said firmly.

“I want to be gone before they arrive,” Lindy said.

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” Nate said. “It’s a big boat.”

“If the Hermit doesn’t want to be found, it could take all night,” Chris said. “We should get started.”

“Chris and Risa should wait here,” Nate suggested.

“No way,” Chris said. “It’ll take twice as long to find him without us.”

“Think about it,” Nate argued. “Somebody needs to keep watch for the

Subs. Also, somebody needs to be ready in case the Hermit tries to slip away. If he escapes, we're all in huge trouble."

"Maybe Risa and Lindy should stay here," Chris negotiated. "You and I can go in after him." Chris held up a pair of handcuffs he had brought from the training facility.

"Lindy is really good at finding people," Nate said. "I don't mean she's lucky, I mean she has an eerie gift." They hadn't told Chris and Risa about Lindy's eye. Until Nate knew he could trust them, he wanted to keep that secret advantage private. He hoped he could bluff his way through this without a full explanation.

"And I guess she feels most comfortable working with you," Chris said.

"Yeah," Lindy agreed. "Is that okay?"

"Keeping watch isn't a weak job," Nate assured them. "If we flush him out, you guys will be more likely to catch him than we will."

"Fine, go," Chris said. "You're wasting time."

"You have handcuffs?" Nate asked Lindy.

She nodded. "You have pepper spray?"

"It's supposed to be strong enough for a bear," Nate said. "Hikers carry it."

Lindy led the way down to the ship, diving steeply before alighting on the deck. Nate landed beside her.

"Know where he is?" Nate asked.

Lindy scanned the ship, then nodded. "Follow me."

She walked quietly to a door, opened it, and Nate followed her through into the darkness beyond. He paused to switch on his night vision, illuminating the hallway in greenish hues. Nate had a flashlight, but he knew that relying on the night vision would give him a better chance of surprising the Hermit.

Lindy levitated a few inches off the ground. Nate followed her lead—it would enable them to move silently. They drifted along the narrow hall. The ship creaked and groaned around them—low, slow sounds. The interior of the ship smelled like old metal and mildew. Lindy led the way down a stairway. Nate hovered close to the stairs, slanting down through the still air.

Partway down the next hall, Lindy paused and waited for Nate to drift close. She put her lips to his ear and whispered, "He's up here on the right."

Nate nodded that he understood. He pulled out a canister of pepper spray and made sure it was ready to fire.

Lindy looked at him with wide eyes, her face green because of the night vision. He could see her fear. He felt it himself.

Who were they about to confront? They knew he was called the Hermit. They knew he might try to run. But what if he decided to fight? In the close

confines within the ship, flying wouldn't offer much advantage.

Nate pantomimed a pistol.

Lindy produced her tranquilizer gun.

Nate put his lips beside her ear. "Our first choice isn't to put him to sleep, but if things get dangerous, let him have it."

She gave him a thumbs-up to show her understanding. She still looked scared.

Nate took the lead, his toes inches above the floor. He glided down the corridor like a ghost. Lindy stayed close behind. Pulling alongside Nate, Lindy gestured toward a particular doorway, then let him reclaim the lead.

Pepper spray ready, Nate peered through the open doorway.

A man stood in the center of the room.

Stripped to the waist, he wore tattered jean shorts and had pale skin. His head was completely bald, but his ashen body was covered by sparse black hairs so bristly that they almost looked like short quills. The hairs were thickest on the front of his legs, the back of his arms, and atop his shoulders. He had a small, upturned nose with nostrils that almost faced forward. Fleshy webbing spanned his fingers and toes.

"Who are you two?" he asked in a scholarly voice with a faint British accent. "You came directly to my room."

The sight of the man had made Nate gasp quietly. The calm, controlled voice did not match his strange appearance. The man made no threatening movement.

"Are you the Hermit?" Nate asked.

"Would it help if I told you no?" the man said dryly.

"Probably not," Nate admitted.

"You're floating," the Hermit said.

"Yep." Nate kept the pepper spray ready.

"I'm not dreaming, am I?" the Hermit checked.

"No. We're here."

"What do you want?" the Hermit asked.

"The Gate," Nate said.

"The Gate? What Gate?"

"The Gate to Uweya," Nate said.

The Hermit said nothing. Then he blinked. It was not a normal blink. It was like a clear film flowing over his eyeballs and then retracting.

"You can float," the Hermit said. "You know about the Gate. You trespassed with impunity. You found me without searching. Who sent you?"

"Does it matter?" Nate asked.

“You want to take one of my most prized possessions,” the Hermit said. “I want to know who sent you. You’ve both been enhanced. The girl has a very impressive eye. Top-notch work. Who?”

“Jonas White,” Lindy said.

The Hermit laughed without cheer. “A fellow Simulcrist, of course, of course. I recently thought I felt someone reaching out for me. Just for a moment. I decided I must have imagined it. Shame on me—I probably should have left immediately.” He grasped a metallic figure eight that dangled from a length of twine around his neck. “He can glimpse me, perhaps, but no matter his power, he can’t touch me.”

“That protects you?” Lindy asked.

“From simulcry? Absolutely. Do your worst; I’m immune.”

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Nate said.

“Of course not,” the Hermit scoffed. “You just want to sneak into my home, threaten me with a caustic substance, and take something that belongs to me, on behalf of an enemy.”

“We don’t really work for Jonas,” Nate insisted. “He captured some friends of ours. We just need to get close to him so we can rescue them. We’d be happy to give you back the Gate once we find our friends.”

The Hermit laughed mockingly. “You think giving this Simulcrist the Gate will help your friends? If you can’t stop Jonas White now, how will you stop him once he becomes the most powerful person in the world?”

“What do you mean?” Nate asked.

“It’s the Gate to Uweya!” the Hermit said, as if that explained everything.

Nate had no response.

“You don’t even know what he’s looking for,” the Hermit realized.

“We just want to help our friends,” Lindy said.

“Uweya is the most powerful simulacrum ever devised,” the Hermit said. “If the legends are true, it can influence the entire world!”

“Are you searching for it?” Nate asked.

“Do I look like I’m on an expedition?” the Hermit asked. “I’ve resided here for years.”

“If you’re a Simulcrist, why haven’t you gone after it?” Nate challenged.

“It would require more than the Gate,” the Hermit said. “Uweya? Me? No thank you. Not at present. Perhaps not ever. Although I rest much easier knowing that I have the Gate and no one else does.”

“We need the Gate,” Nate said. “Others are coming. We’re going to get it. Don’t make this difficult.”

“That’s too bad about your friends,” the Hermit sympathized. “I wish

nobody any harm. Actually, I wish nobody anything. I just want to be left alone. Is that too much to ask?"

"People are coming," Nate stressed. "Give us the Gate and you can leave quietly. We don't want to harass you."

"Yes you do!" the Hermit replied sharply. "You are here to harass me. You are here to steal from me. This conversation is over. Tell Jonas White that he has a new enemy."

"Don't make this harder than—" Nate began.

The Hermit picked up a yellowed sheet of parchment and poked three fingers through it. As he did so, with a shriek of metal, the wall behind him tore open, forming a much larger hole of the exact same shape. Casting the parchment aside, the hermit snatched a green backpack, shrugging it on as he dove through the misshapen hole and out of the ship.

Soaring forward, her body horizontal, Lindy streaked out through the hole. Nate paused to pick up the parchment. Tearing the hole in the parchment wider, he watched the hole in the wall expand to match. Nate dropped the parchment and followed Lindy through the widened gap.

Outside, Chris and Risa were flying after Lindy, who glided away from the *Striker*, roughly thirty feet above the water. She veered away from the nearest shore, pointing down as if tracking unseen prey. Nate accelerated and caught up to Chris.

"Does she really see him?" Chris asked.

"I trust her," Nate replied. "She has a sixth sense for these things."

"I have night vision, and I don't see a thing," Risa said.

"Exactly," Nate said. "Either Lindy has him, or we're out of luck."

They had caught up to Lindy. She continued to stare down at the impenetrable water. She was flying well below top speed, but fast enough to suggest that the Hermit could swim at an abnormal pace.

"He has to surface eventually," Chris said.

"I'm not sure," Nate replied. "He didn't look entirely human. He had webbed feet and hands."

"He's a merman?" Risa asked.

"I don't know," Nate said. "Some of the people who hang out with magicians have modifications. They're called engineered apprentices. I've met some strange ones, including a guy full of disgusting jelly. The Hermit might be one of those, but I'm not really sure."

"You've been doing this for a while?" Chris asked.

"I've had some experiences," Nate answered vaguely.

They continued to fly away from the ship. As they neared the center of the

waterway, the Hermit surfaced. He held up a small box, opened the lid, and then got out of the way as it rapidly unfolded, inexplicably expanding into a twenty-foot sailboat. The vessel looked old-fashioned, with a single, triangular sail that hung from a slanted mast, rising from the front of the craft to the back.

“What?” Chris exclaimed. “Where’d that come from?”

“I don’t know,” Nate replied.

“Pigeon’s here,” Lindy called. “That’s why the Hermit surfaced. The Subs were closing in from all sides.”

The Hermit boarded the vessel and rummaged in his backpack. Nate suspected the Gate was in the backpack. He swooped down as the Hermit withdrew a small model identical to his sailboat. Arms outstretched, Nate closed in as the Hermit blew on the model’s sail. The mast of the twenty-foot vessel creaked as the sail suddenly filled with wind, propelling the craft briskly forward. Due to the sudden motion, Nate missed his target and pulled up to reassess the situation.

The Hermit moved the rudder of the tiny model, and the larger vessel swerved dramatically. One of the Subs came flying out of the water like a trained dolphin. He had been aiming for the Hermit, but when the sailboat changed direction, he arced harmlessly though the air over part of the stern and plunged back below the surface.

The Hermit continued to blow the sail of his tiny model. The sail of his actual boat strained the mast as the vessel skimmed over the water. Nate and the other Jets had to fly at a good pace to keep up.

Nate glided closer to the others, thirty or forty feet above the bulging sail. “The little model controls the boat,” he said.

“Uh, yeah,” Lindy replied. “I noticed.”

“We want his backpack?” Chris asked.

“That’s my best guess,” Nate said. “It was all he took from the *Striker*.”

Another Sub, Mindy, surged out of the water. The Hermit swiveled the sail of the model sailboat, and the actual boom lurched sideways, batting the girl away. She splashed back into the water. The sight of the impact made Nathan flinch—the boom had clubbed her hard.

“Should we go help her?” Nate asked.

“I see a Sub on the way,” Lindy said. She brandished her tranquilizer pistol. “Is it time for this?”

“Probably,” Nate said. “I guess we can wake him up if the Gate isn’t in the backpack.”

Lindy dove down nearer to the boat, keeping well away from the boom. Nate darted down to fly beside her. She took aim and fired twice.

Howling, the hermit turned the sailboat sharply. Setting aside his model boat, he opened a weathered bin on the deck and retrieved a compound bow. As the Hermit hastily nocked an arrow, Lindy veered up and left, Nate up and right. Climbing as quickly as possible, Nate saw the Hermit release the arrow, but he couldn't follow where it went. Looking urgently at the other Jets, Nate saw that nobody had been hit.

But the Hermit did not stop shooting. He fired arrow after arrow. The fourth took Risa through the thigh.

All four of the Jets broke off the pursuit and climbed straight up. Once high enough to feel safe from further arrows, they huddled together in the night sky. Risa grimaced in pain.

"Take her back," Nate told Chris.

He looked pale, but nodded. "What about the Hermit?"

"We'll keep after him," Nate promised. "But Risa needs a doctor."

"Do I take her to a hospital?" Chris asked.

Nate shook his head. "Try Jonas White first. Some of these magicians have healing abilities. Even if he can't fix her, he'll know what to do."

"You okay?" Lindy asked, a hand on Risa's shoulder.

"It hurts," Risa replied bravely through gritted teeth.

"Go," Nate said. "Hurry."

Chris took Risa's hand. "Can you fly?"

She gave a quick nod.

The two of them accelerated rapidly, racing back toward Walnut Hills.

"Think she'll be okay?" Lindy asked.

"I don't know," Nate said. "Hopefully the arrow didn't hit an artery or something. One thing is for sure—this isn't a game. That Sub who got swatted found that out as well."

"Do we keep after him?" Lindy asked.

"I think so," Nate said. "But we need to keep our distance. He's playing for keeps."

"I hit him with at least one dart," Lindy said. "I saw it connect."

"I hope it takes effect soon," Nate replied.

The sailboat had moved away while they talked. Nate led the way down toward it again. Before long he came close enough to see the Hermit on the deck, blowing on the sail of the model. The compound bow remained close at hand.

The Hermit showed no sign of dropping unconscious. Perhaps Lindy had missed after all. Or maybe he was immune.

Nate felt unsure how to proceed. He wanted to claim the Gate so he could

stay close to Jonas White and rescue John and Mozag. But he didn't want to get himself or Lindy killed by an arrow. How would that benefit anyone?

Lindy flew near to Nate. "Two Subs closing in," she informed him.

One of the Subs shot up from the water and onto the deck of the sailboat. Nate recognized him as Drew. Instead of leaping at the Hermit, he had simply come aboard. Crouched and completely dry, he remained half the length of the vessel away from the Hermit.

"Get off my boat," the Hermit warned. "Stop pursuing me. I won't ask twice."

Edging forward, Drew produced a truncheon that looked like a miniature baseball bat. Nate had toyed with some similar truncheons at the training facility.

Setting aside the model sailboat, the Hermit grasped his bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. Drew dove over the side of the boat at the same time as Pigeon burst out of the water from behind the Hermit. As the Hermit swiveled to face the new threat, Pigeon ignored him, lunging instead for the model sailboat. The Hermit had barely set his arrow to the string when Pigeon brought both hands down on the intricate model. The actual sailboat buckled and shattered, catapulting the Hermit into the water.

"Way to go, Pidge!" Nate shouted. "What's going on now?" he called to Lindy.

"The Hermit is heading straight for the nearest shore," Lindy replied. "He has the backpack. He dropped the bow to swim better. Pigeon and Drew are after him. He keeps fending them off with his hands and feet."

Lindy flew along, pointing down at the water, and Nate followed unquestioningly. He got his pepper spray ready. The shore drew steadily closer.

"Pigeon and Drew keep harassing him," Lindy reported. "The Hermit is fighting as much as he's swimming. He still has his backpack."

They reached the shore and the Hermit emerged from the water with Pigeon and Drew in close pursuit. But they didn't stay close for long. On land, the Hermit was at least twice as fast as the two boys. He dashed away into a stand of trees. The Subs stayed after him, but they lost ground with every stride.

Lindy flew over the treetops, still pointing down at the Hermit as she had while over the water. "He's fast," she told Nate. "Some of the undergrowth is pretty dense, but he just charges right through it."

At the far side of the trees, the Hermit sprinted into a field. Lindy looked over at Nate expectantly.

"Let him gain a little more distance," Nate said. "I don't want the Subs catching up. We're going to win today."

They tracked him across the field, over some rough terrain, and into a field

beyond. “The Subs gave up,” Lindy said, looking back. “They’re returning to the water.”

Nate swooped down. The Hermit’s speed might seem impressive to somebody chasing him on the ground, but Nate could have flown circles around him. Once he came too close to miss, Nate discharged the pepper spray. The Hermit collapsed, writhing and shrieking.

Nate and Lindy landed a few yards away from their quarry. Back arched, tendons standing out, the Hermit rocked from side to side, making strangled sounds.

“We have more,” Nate warned. “Don’t make us use it.”

Still in agony, the Hermit waved a hand. “No more! No more. My skin is very sensitive.”

Seeing how pathetic the Hermit now looked, and hearing the anguish in his voice, Nate felt a little guilty for spraying him. “You shot our friend,” Nate said.

“Only after you chased and shot me,” the Hermit countered, his voice strained, his legs twitching. “How dare you blame me?”

“We need the Gate,” Nate said.

Scowling, the Hermit sat up and jerked open his backpack.

“No tricks,” Nate said, holding out the pepper spray.

The Hermit held up a box, his lips quivering with pain and anger. “This is not the Gate,” he explained. “Nor is it a trick. You’ll find the Gate in here.”

Wincing and clutching his shoulder, the Hermit rose to his knees. He peeled open the box, and it promptly unfolded into a large barn made of dark wood. Nate took a step back, staring at the impossible structure.

“How do you do that?” Lindy asked.

“I have my secrets,” the Hermit said. “Same as any magician.”

“I need to tell you something,” Nate said. “Will you listen?”

The Hermit sneered. “Long as you’re holding that attack spray, I’m all ears.”

“You don’t want Jonas White to have the Gate,” Nate said.

“Of course I don’t,” the Hermit said. “But thanks for rubbing it in.”

“Neither do we,” Nate pledged earnestly. “I’m serious. He kidnapped our friends. We’re only helping him until we can rescue them. I don’t want him to find Uweya.”

“Handing over the Gate will move him a major step toward that end,” the Hermit cautioned.

“We’re taking it for now,” Nate said firmly. “But we don’t want it permanently. Before this is over, I’m going to take it back from Jonas, and then I’ll return it to you.”

With one eye squinted more than the other, the Hermit regarded Nate. “Then you’re playing a dangerous game, boy. Jonas White is a magician of no small talent. He’s made a simulacrum of you, I can see that plain as sunrise. Crossing him won’t be as easy as you suppose.”

Nate shrugged. “I’m not expecting it to be easy. But I’m going to do it. And I want to return the Gate to you afterward. We’re only taking it to help our friends.”

The Hermit sighed. “Much as I despise what you’re doing, I hear no falsehood in your words.” He extended an arm. “Travel that way some miles, and you’ll find three hills of nearly equal height. For the next fortnight, I’ll be in a cave on the north side of the farthest.”

“Fortnight?” Nate asked.

“Two weeks,” Lindy supplied.

“Bring back the Gate, and I’ll no longer count you an enemy,” the Hermit said. “But don’t fail. If Jonas gets his hands on Uweya, not much else will matter.”

“I’ll do my best,” Nate said.

“Want to really do your best?” the Hermit asked. “Let me go. Tell Jonas I got away. I’ll run. I’ll take the Gate beyond his reach.”

“He has other helpers,” Nate said. “And he found some way to track you. I have to do this.”

The Hermit bowed his head. “Into the barn, then. You’ll find the Gate in a trunk in the loft.”

“Lindy,” Nate said, “go get it. I’ll watch him.”

The Hermit frowned. “You should both go. You may need to help each other. It’s quite heavy.”

“Then you come too,” Nate said.

“I can’t enter,” the Hermit insisted. “If I go inside, the barn could collapse.”

“If we leave you out here, I’m sure it will collapse,” Nate replied. “With us in it.”

The Hermit folded his arms.

“I hit you with a dart,” Lindy said. “I see it in your back.”

“I felt the sedative in my system,” the Hermit replied. “I’m good at countering such things. The burning spray? Not so much. Nothing has hurt me like that in a great while.”

“We could tell,” Nate said. “Lindy, I’ll watch him. Use the Finder’s Dust.”

“I’ll be right back,” Lindy said, flying off.

Nate watched the Hermit steadily until she returned. The Hermit seemed fidgety and displeased, but he made no aggressive move.

“Wasn’t hard to find,” Lindy said. “It’s kind of heavy. Not more than I could manage.”

“Solid stone,” the Hermit said.

She held a rectangular block of light-colored stone the size of a hardcover book. Set into the stone was an elaborate gate locked with a crossbar on either side.

“What do we do with it?” Nate asked.

“Burn me if you wish,” the Hermit replied, “but I honestly hope you never find out. Sadly, I fear Jonas White already knows.”

Prisoners



Pigeon cruised through the water like no creature under the sea. He didn't need to kick his feet or stroke with his hands. The effort never tired him. His inexplicable propulsion seemed much like the flying he saw the Jets do, except it worked only in the water.

The temperature felt perfect, neither too warm nor too cold. In the open water, he could reach impressive speeds that were impossible in the close confines of the training center pool. The water was too dark for him to see anything, but he could feel for miles using a sense that seemed a blend of touch, sight, and hearing. He could feel the surface of the water above, the ground below, the shorelines at either side, and the multitude of fish and plants around him. He could sense the wreckage of the sailboat and the bulky presence of the *Striker* in the distance, and he could clearly discern the three other Subs around him.

"Do we try to head them off?" Drew asked. "Maybe we can steal the Gate from them last minute, just before they enter Arcadeland."

Speaking underwater felt just as natural as speaking in air. Better, actually, because their voices seemed to carry farther.

"We swim faster than the Jets could guess," Pigeon said. "But they're still faster than us. If we ambush them outside of Arcadeland, we'll be out of our element, and they'll be flying. Our chance was when the Hermit was in the water. We blew it. It's over."

"Are we sure they got it?" Mindy asked. She had been temporarily stunned when she was clobbered by the boom. Steven, the fourth Sub, had stayed behind to tend to her. She claimed to feel fine now.

"Sure as we can be," Pigeon replied. "The Jets were in the air, hot on his trail. The Hermit was unarmed. No way Nate blew an advantage like that."

"The Hermit might have had more tricks in his backpack," Steven said.

“Like the sailboat.”

“Possibly,” Pigeon conceded. “Even if the Jets fail, it just means they’ll lose their stamps along with us. Either way, the party is over.”

“You’re giving up too easily,” Mindy complained. “Why not race back to Arcadeland and see if we can intercept it? One of the Jets got hurt. We’ll probably outnumber the ones with the Gate.”

“Sure, they can fly,” Drew said. “But they’ll have to enter through a door. Maybe they’ll get sloppy.”

“Worth a try,” Pigeon said, trying to hide his lack of enthusiasm. He didn’t want to beat the Jets. And he didn’t think the Subs had much chance of doing so even if they tried their hardest. “Lead on.”

Pigeon followed the others, trying to enjoy the swim. They should have explored big, open water before tonight. It was a whole different experience from the training room pool or the canal where they had sometimes practiced after hours. It felt amazing to zoom effortlessly through the water, breathing easily. He had no fear of colliding with obstacles or encountering danger because he could sense everything around him more clearly than with sight on a bright day. He could feel the textures of surfaces he was not touching. He could sense tiny particles in the water hundreds of yards away. When he lost his stamp, he would miss the experience of flying through water with his senses enhanced.

Drew backtracked toward Arcadeland at top speed. Pigeon tried not to worry about Nate and Lindy. The Hermit had run off into the trees at an unmatched pace. After the Subs had lost him in the darkness, there had been nothing they could do to catch him.

Nate and Lindy had tranquilizer guns, they could fly, and they were smart. He had to trust that they would be all right.

As they glided through the water, the other Subs talked about what Arcadeland doors they would cover to try to intercept the Gate. Pigeon chimed in just enough to make it seem like he cared. He wasn’t worried about the Subs stopping Nate. He doubted whether any amount of planning would make any difference.

When they finally exited the water, a car awaited to take them to Arcadeland. The ride had been prearranged through Todd, for a small fee. All of the Subs had chipped in.

Pigeon let Drew claim shotgun, content to sit in the back with Steven and Mindy. What would he do without any future stamps? For one thing, he could start working more closely with Mr. Stott and the Battiatos again. Also, once his latest sub stamp wore off, he should be able to use magical candy again.

The car came to a stop in the Arcadeland lot. The facility was closed. Todd

and Cleon stood out front.

Drew and the other Subs hurried out of the car, but Cleon raised his hands calmly. “No rush,” he said. “The Jets beat you here with the Gate.”

“It’s over?” Mindy asked.

“This phase of the contest is done,” Todd explained. “But your involvement hasn’t ended yet. Mr. White wants to speak with you all about a special assignment.”

“And take away our stamps,” Pigeon said.

Cleon held up an objecting finger. “That’s for him to decide.” He opened one of the front doors.

Katie Sung awaited them inside, clipboard in hand. The arcade had only a fraction of its normal lights on. The games created a flickering twilight, mostly blues and reds. Katie smiled professionally.

“Welcome back, Subs,” she said. “We all really appreciate your hard work and dedication. Rest assured, you won’t leave without some impressive consolation prizes. Mr. White wants to meet personally with you all regarding a bonus assignment.”

“Are we losing our stamps?” Drew asked unhappily. “I worked hard for my stamp.”

“Mr. White is calling the shots,” Katie said. “Let’s go find out how he feels about the matter.”

Pigeon wasn’t sure he wanted to know how Jonas White felt.

They followed Katie through an EMPLOYEES ONLY door, then down a hall to a room they hadn’t previously visited. Mr. White was not awaiting them. Instead, the four Subs waited together in the empty room with Katie.

“He’s coming?” Pigeon asked.

“He’ll just be a moment,” Katie replied. “The Jets didn’t beat you four by much. I expect that he’s still congratulating them.”

“And telling them that they’ll get our stamps,” Mindy grumbled.

“Don’t be a sore loser,” Katie chided. “You would have happily taken theirs.”

“How is Risa?” Pigeon asked. “It looked like she got hurt.”

“She’ll be fine,” Katie said. “She’s already good as new. Mr. White can work wonders with healing if he has a simulacrum of you.”

“Wait a minute,” Steven said urgently. “What’s going on? I can’t move!”

“He can do other things too,” Katie said. “Don’t panic, or he’ll render you incapable of speech as well.”

“I can’t move either,” Mindy announced.

Pigeon flexed his fingers and toes. He still felt fine. Should he run?

Drew made a dash for the door, falling rigidly to the floor before he was halfway there. “What’s happening?” he cried, lying in an unnatural pose.

“You should keep still,” Katie advised. “There is no escaping this. You’ll be more comfortable if you relax.”

Pigeon was trying to decide what position would be least annoying when he felt his body lock up. He retained sensation in his limbs, but nothing would move. He couldn’t turn his head. He couldn’t even glance around—his eyeballs were frozen in place. He could breathe. He could swallow. He could blink.

“What’s he doing?” Pigeon asked, fighting to keep the panic out of his voice. At least his lips and jaw could move. At least he could speak.

“I expect he’s preparing you for unwelcome news,” Katie answered. “We’ll know shortly.”

“Can I at least stand up?” Drew asked.

“You forfeited that right when you attempted to flee,” Katie said.

Focusing all of his will to the task, Pigeon tried to twitch his thumb. Nothing happened. It was as if his extremities were no longer accepting messages from his brain. He tried to shift his glance, but his eyeballs remained fixed.

A door opened, and Jonas White toddled into the room. Unable to look directly at him, Pigeon had to content himself with monitoring the magician peripherally. Jonas wore slippers and a silky robe embroidered with a pattern of gold, purple, and black diamonds. He came to a stop facing them.

“My Subs,” he said affectionately. “It would have been quite a coup had you brought home the Gate. But your presence was necessary. Without you there, the Hermit might have fled deep underwater and escaped. Your aquatic abilities may still play a role in upcoming challenges, but alas, those talents will be wielded by others.”

“Why freeze us?” Mindy asked defiantly.

“Out of concern for your welfare,” Jonas replied smoothly. “You may have reacted poorly to some of my news. Out of the water, you’re as vulnerable as any ordinary schoolchildren, and I would hate to see any harm befall you.”

“What news?” Pigeon asked.

Jonas placed his hands behind his back. “This treasure hunt is a very sensitive matter. Now that you have lost your stamps to the Jets, I cannot permit you to leave here until our competition is over.”

“What?” Drew exclaimed.

“You never said anything about this!” Steven accused.

“My parents will freak out,” Mindy warned.

Jonas shuffled over to Mindy and patted her shoulder. “I have seen to it that

your parents will disregard your disappearances. Nobody will even realize you're gone. At the end of all this, I'll deliver the four of you safe and sound."

"How long?" Pigeon asked.

"As long as it takes," Jonas answered. "Hopefully not more than a week."

"We'll be paralyzed like this the whole time?" Drew fretted.

Jonas furrowed his brow. "Nonsense. That would be tedious for me. Taxing. You'll remain inert until I deliver you to your cells."

"Cells?" Steven cried hysterically.

Jonas waved a hand. "I could call them guest rooms, but that would be an exaggeration. You will have food, shelter—the basic necessities. Not much more. Don't try to escape. Don't test me. Do not forget that I have your simulacra. I was gentle this time. You had not defied me. I am only holding you here as a necessary evil. But it is necessary." His voice hardened. "If you cross me, I will not be gentle."

Pigeon could feel himself sweating. Unable to move, he was more aware of his perspiration than usual. He was trapped in his own body. He had never felt so helpless. He tried to think of a way out of this. Nothing came to mind.

"How will we get to our cells?" Mindy asked.

"Don't worry about the logistics," Jonas said amiably. "I'll see to that. Try to relax and make the best of your situation. You will be amply rewarded upon release. That is all."

Jonas turned and shuffled toward the door. Pigeon realized he might not get another chance to ask questions, but no sensible inquiries came to mind. If he asked about John Dart or Mozag, it would only arouse suspicion of Nate and the others. His best chance to gain information might be to simply keep his eyes and ears open as a prisoner.

After Jonas left the room, Katie approached Pigeon. Her hands traveled over him probingly. She found his stamp and kept it. She disarmed him. But fortunately she missed the tracking button.

Todd and Cleon loaded Pigeon onto a dolly, and Todd wheeled him from the room. They passed along industrial halls, turning a couple of corners before reaching an elevator.

"Are we going underground?" Pigeon said.

"You'll see," Todd replied, pushing the call button.

"Will he really release us?" Pigeon asked.

"Be a good prisoner, and everything should work out fine," Todd replied.

When the elevator doors opened, Todd wheeled Pigeon inside. Pigeon was left facing the rear of the elevator. He heard the doors close, felt the elevator start descending, and then felt it stop. He heard the doors open, and Todd wheeled

him out into a drab, concrete hall.

They traveled down the hall a considerable distance, passing few doorways or intersecting corridors. At last the hallway ended at a T-shaped intersection with another hall. Todd turned left, then made a few other turns before stopping outside a heavy wooden door. He unlocked it with a key and trundled Pigeon inside.

“Give it half an hour or so,” Todd said, lifting Pigeon off the dolly and setting him on his feet. “Then do yourself a favor and sit tight.”

Pigeon was left facing away from the door. The ceiling, walls, and floor were all bare concrete. A primitive toilet awaited in the corner. A flimsy cot paralleled one wall, blankets folded at the foot. Pigeon heard Todd wheel the dolly out, close the door, and lock it.

Standing still was not tiring, but whenever he attempted to move, Pigeon found it infuriating. He tried to focus on the things he could do. He blinked. He breathed. He opened and closed his mouth.

Pigeon worried about his friends. He worried about himself. How could they fight a magician who could immobilize them like this? What chance did they have against this kind of power? He thought about the button in his pocket. Hopefully the Battiatos could use it to track him here. Jonas probably didn't have simulacra of them. Maybe they could mount a rescue. Unless these cells somehow muffled magical tracking. Lindy hadn't been able to see several parts of Arcadeland.

Pigeon didn't have many assets. He didn't have his tranquilizer pistol. He had doubted whether the weapon would survive extended submersion, so it was home in his bedroom. He had brought no magical candy because he couldn't use it with the sub stamp. Katie probably would have taken it from him anyway. All he had was his mind—and the button stuffed in his pocket.

Pigeon guessed it hadn't been more than ten minutes when he began to regain control of his body. It started slowly—his fingers could twitch, his eyeballs could shift, his toes could stretch. Then all at once the other frozen parts of his body abruptly thawed.

His limbs felt sore and rubbery, so Pigeon walked over to the cot and sat down. He removed the button from his pocket. The Battiatos had told him that in an emergency, he could break it and they would come running.

But shouldn't he wait? It seemed likely that if Jonas White held John and Mozag prisoner, they would be down here someplace. The underground holding area seemed plenty big and secure.

He held the button in both hands. What if he snapped it and the Battiatos couldn't sense it? What if this underground complex was shielded against

magical transmissions? Would the Battiatos at least have a sense of where and when the tracker had stopped sending a signal? It was all speculation because Pigeon had no clue how the button actually worked.

The button felt brittle in his hands. He was no Hercules, but he doubted whether he would have trouble breaking it. Wouldn't such a move be a little hasty, though? They had wanted to get inside to do reconnaissance. He could be a bigger help to the Battiatos if he found out more about this holding area before he called them. Presumably he would get to shower occasionally, or get some exercise. He might get a chance to learn the layout of the hallways. He could try to ascertain how well the place was defended. He could even try to discover where John and Mozag were imprisoned.

Pigeon placed the button back into his pocket. He wanted nothing more than to go home and sleep in his own bed. He didn't want to remain in this dingy cell, bored and uncomfortable. But he could always snap the button later. First he would see what information he could uncover from within this secret prison.

The Graywaters



As Nate followed Cleon through an EMPLOYEES ONLY door to get his stamp refreshed, he couldn't stop worrying about Pigeon. After bringing the Gate to Jonas the night before, Nate and Lindy had gone to Pigeon's house and waited for him to show up. But Pigeon had never made an appearance.

Today, none of the Subs had visited the training center. Nate supposed that might be expected if they had been stripped of their powers, but it still added to his unease. During their lunch break, Nate had returned to Pigeon's house, and Lindy had gone looking for the Battiatos.

After feeding Diego Brain Feed, Nate learned that the dog hadn't seen Pigeon since the day before. Lindy found that the Battiatos had also heard nothing from Pigeon, and that they were having trouble pinpointing his tracking button. She had set up another meeting with the Battiatos for the evening.

The purpose of spending time at Arcadeland, the point of earning stamps, the idea behind joining the treasure hunt, had all been to find John and Mozag. Nate felt no closer to finding John than when they had started, and now they had lost a member of their rescue team.

When he returned to the training facility, Nate had filled in Summer and Trevor about Pigeon. They had kept the conversations short—it was getting hard to talk to each other at the training center as tensions increased between the rival clubs.

Then Todd and Cleon had shown up with a new assignment. As expected, this new challenge would pit the Racers against the Tanks. They were supposed to meet at the training center at five p.m. in order to go collect a map to an artifact called the Protector. Whichever club brought the map to Arcadeland first would retain their stamps and win the stamps belonging to the losing club.

Walking along a hall cluttered with pipes and wires, Nate felt like too much

was happening too quickly. The challenge between the Tanks and Racers meant Summer and Trevor would miss the meeting with the Battiatos tonight. It also meant one or the other of them might go missing as well.

After rounding some corners, Cleon led the way to an elevator. He wore jeans, boots, and a creamy leather jacket with fringed sleeves. Cleon thumbed the button to call the elevator.

“This place has levels?” Risa asked. Jonas had already healed her by the time Nate arrived last night. The only remains of her arrow wound had been faint scars on the front and back of her thigh.

“You know when you hit a ball into the last hole out on the mini course?” Cleon asked.

“Sure,” Risa said. “The one you don’t get back.”

Cleon gave a nod. “Those balls have to end up somewhere.”

The elevator doors opened, and Cleon accompanied the Jets inside. He hit a button. Nate noticed that the elevator only had two levels. They were currently on 1, heading down to B. Either the elevator was very slow, or the basement was well below the ground level.

“You’re about to make a new friend,” Cleon announced as they exited the elevator. “She’ll take care of refreshing your stamps from here on out.”

“Who?” Lindy asked.

“A special guest,” Cleon said. “Jonas brought her here because of her particular talents.” He stopped in front of a door and knocked. “Her name is Tallah Brooks. You can call her Ms. Brooks.”

The door was opened by a heavysset woman with mocha skin. She had a broad, kindly face and wore a lavender scarf bound in her graying hair.

“Seems I have visitors,” Tallah said. “You may as well come inside.”

The woman stepped aside, and Cleon led the Jets into the spacious room. A pair of sofas sat at right angles to each other near a large coffee table. Thick carpeting covered the floors, and wallpaper softened the walls. Shaded lamps gave the room a pleasant glow. Three doors led to other rooms. The contrast between the comfortably furnished apartment and the bare concrete of the hall outside was so extreme that Nate felt like he had walked onto a movie set rather than into an actual home.

“These four need your services,” Cleon said.

“So young,” Tallah said, looking them over and clucking her tongue. “How did you kids get mixed up with these folks?”

“Arcade games,” Nate said.

Tallah rolled her eyes. “I don’t expect to see the day when any good comes from video games.” She gestured at the couches. “Have a seat, children. I’m Ms.

Tallah Brooks. Call me Brooksie if you like. Or Tallah.”

“Or Ms. Brooks,” Cleon inserted.

“This is no schoolhouse, Cleon,” Tallah scolded. “Let them call me what they like. Anybody hungry?”

“We’re here for the stamps,” Cleon said.

“Shush,” Tallah said. “I know why you’re here. Jonas White already had a talk with me about that. Doesn’t mean an end to civility. Doesn’t mean kids no longer get hungry. I have chocolate peanut butter brownies.”

“That sounds good,” Nate said.

“Sure,” Chris chimed in.

Tallah smiled. “That’s more like it. Give me a moment.” She turned and bustled out of the room.

“She’s a magician,” Cleon murmured once Tallah had left. “Don’t eat the brownies.”

“She’d hurt us?” Chris asked.

“We have a specific arrangement with her,” Cleon replied quietly. “She can’t do anything harmful against your will. But if you eat something voluntarily . . . let’s just say I won’t be having one.”

Tallah returned to the room bearing a plate of gooey brownies. “These are a specialty,” she said warmly, offering the plate to Nate. He looked from the brownies to Tallah. He didn’t accept one. “Lost your appetite?”

Cleon hooked his thumbs into his pockets. “Can you assure us the brownies will have no side effects?”

Placing the plate on the coffee table, Tallah shook her head and clucked her tongue. “Nobody trusts anybody these days. I suppose we should get down to business. What would you like blended?”

“Blended?” Lindy asked.

“I have a knack for reconciling different enchantments,” Tallah said. “I can help diverse types of magic function simultaneously.”

“She can make a jet stamp and a sub stamp work at the same time,” Cleon said.

“Is it safe?” Nate asked.

“I’ve studied your stamps,” Tallah replied. “The enchantment is complex. I should be able to coax any two of them to harmonize. Three would be too many.”

“You don’t have to blend your stamps,” Cleon said. “But I would generally recommend it. The other clubs will have this option as well.”

“We’ll be going up against Racer Tanks?” Nate asked.

“That’s the idea,” Cleon replied.

“Me first,” Lindy said. “Make me into a flying submarine.”

“Give me your hand, child,” Tallah said. She dipped a brush in a tube and spread a clear solution on the back of Lindy’s hand. Then she applied the jet stamp, followed by the sub stamp, one atop the other. Eyes closed, Tallah held Lindy’s hand and mumbled some words, then released her.

“Did it work?” Lindy asked.

“Success,” Tallah said. “Who’s next?”

Chris stepped forward. Nate got in line.

Trevor sat up front with the driver on the way to Devil’s Shadow Mobile Home Park. He did not get shotgun because he was in charge—he was in front because he hadn’t gelled with his group.

Paige, Hailey, and Claire sat behind him. The girls had all completed sixth grade, and they knew each other from going to the same Walnut Hills school. They had two other friends who had been gunning for stamps but had failed to earn enough tickets in time.

“How much farther?” Trevor asked the driver.

The swarthy man checked his GPS. “Five minutes tops.”

Trevor was glad to be riding in a car. He and the Racers could move quickly, but with time slowed down from their point of view, they still had to run every step of wherever they went. The car would let them save their energy for when it mattered.

Trevor turned to face the girls in the back. “Do we have a strategy?”

Paige looked at him as though he had just asked the color of the sky. “Outrun them?”

“Right,” Trevor said patiently. “But we also have to find the Graywater family and get the map from them. It could take time. Those Tanks are really strong. If they catch up, we could be in trouble.”

“They won’t catch up if we hurry,” Paige replied.

“Even if they did, we just keep away from them,” Hailey said. “You can’t hurt what you can’t catch.”

“What if they corner us?” Trevor challenged. “How would we outrun them in a small room or narrow hall?”

“How about we don’t let them corner us like that?” Claire said as if the solution were obvious. “We run away before they pin us down.”

“Won’t we need a lookout?” Trevor asked.

“Good idea,” Paige said. “You can be the lookout.”

Hailey and Claire giggled. Clearly they thought it would be a good way to keep him uninvolved.

Trevor faced front, fighting down his frustration. The girls were seldom openly mean to him. They were just dismissive. And not very bright. He was pretty sure that Paige and Claire came from wealthy families, and he suspected that they had won their tickets by spending lots of money rather than by having much skill.

“You want to keep your stamps, don’t you?” Trevor asked.

“No, we want to give them away,” Hailey responded sarcastically.

“Nobody can catch us,” Claire said. “Stop stressing out so much.”

“This might not be as easy as you girls think,” Trevor insisted.

“Thanks for the twentieth warning,” Paige said. “We’re ready. Blabbing about it won’t change anything. We find the Graywaters. We get the map. We outrun the Tanks. We bring it to Arcadeland.”

“Whatever,” Trevor said.

The driver had a small smile. He rubbed his oily moustache. Trevor looked away. Todd had assured them that the driver would convey them back and forth between Arcadeland and Devil’s Shadow, no questions asked. They were free to speak about anything in front of him, but they shouldn’t expect any extra assistance from him. Trevor didn’t even know his name.

They turned onto a smooth dirt road and followed it across a field and around some oak trees. “Here we are,” the driver announced. “Up ahead.”

An arched sign reading DEVIL’S SHADOW formed the entrance to the trailer park. Beyond the entrance, Trevor could see a number of mobile homes in various states of disrepair. The driver pulled off to the side of the road just shy of the entrance.

Trevor looked back at the Tanks pulling over in their car as well. “The Tanks are right behind us,” he warned.

“Not for long,” Paige said, climbing out of the car. She and the other Racers took off at superhuman speed.

Trevor jumped out as well and followed. He shifted into race mode, an adjustment that had already become second nature, as simple as concentrating to read the words in a book. Everything around him slowed down. He glanced back at the Tanks getting out of the car with unnatural slowness, then sprinted to catch up with the girls.

Right now he was moving three or four times faster than everything else around him. He felt normal until he noticed a butterfly fluttering sluggishly. Running still made him tired, but no more tired than ordinary running. He could increase his speed again by entering the second altered state three or four times speedier than the first, but it would make him tire rapidly and could lead to a headache. He would save that secret weapon for emergencies.

The girls were not running too quickly, so he caught up to them just beyond the trailer park entrance.

“Shouldn’t we slow down?” Trevor asked. “Won’t it look weird to people?”

“Aren’t you more worried about the Tanks?” Claire asked.

“We’ll slow up if we see people,” Paige said, still running hard.

Trevor had to agree that the trailer park didn’t look very lively. The outdated mobile homes were arranged haphazardly. There couldn’t have been more than thirty or forty total. Some appeared abandoned. Off to one side, a scrawny cat disappeared through a glassless window, the slow leap looking odd from Trevor’s quickened perspective.

Paige slipped out of race mode, and the others followed her lead. It took Trevor a moment to realize why she had slowed. As they came around the nearest mobile home, a man had come into view. He was in his fifties or sixties, with thinning hair, a white T-shirt, and a bulging round belly. He stood in front of a trailer watering the nearby dirt with a hose, his thumb over the nozzle to make the water fan out. Trevor didn’t see any plants or grass. Maybe there were seeds in the ground, or maybe the man was just trying to reduce dust.

The girls jogged toward the man at a normal speed, and Trevor tagged along. The man looked up as the girls approached. “Evening,” he said.

“Hi,” Paige began in a bright, friendly voice. “We’re looking for the Graywater family. Could you help us out?”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. “What would you kids want with the Graywaters?”

“We have a present for them,” Hailey invented.

“Were you invited?” the man asked. “How do you know them?”

“They’re old friends of my family,” Claire said. “We’re bringing them a surprise.”

The man shook his head. “The Graywaters don’t like uninvited guests. I hope you kids know what you’re doing.”

“Are they mean?” Paige asked innocently.

“Not mean,” the man responded. “Just private. They own the park. If your family knows them, I expect it’ll go all right.” He waved an arm to indicate a direction. “Last unit in the back. Green with white trim. Can’t miss it.”

“Thanks,” the girls answered in chorus.

The man nodded, turning and flicking his wrist as he started dampening a new area. Trevor kept quiet and trotted away with the girls. Once they passed out of the man’s view they sped up again.

Trevor had misgivings about their strategy. If the Tanks were hurrying, the pause talking to the man had given them a chance to catch up quite a bit. If he

and the girls didn't get the map quickly, how long before the Tanks showed up and bullied their way to the prize?

Trevor did not want the Racers to lose. Summer was a Tank, but she had more capable people on her team. If they didn't want Jonas White to reach his goals, they needed Hailey, Paige, and Claire helping him rather than the Tanks.

The girls slowed back to a regular pace as the green trailer came into view. It was by far the nicest trailer in the park—larger, newer, and better appointed. It had a neat lawn with a tidy fence. A small satellite dish perched on the roof, aimed skyward. Flowers bloomed in the window boxes. A large porch with glider chairs and a swinging bench provided a shaded sitting area. Trevor had a great aunt who had retired to a trailer park, living in a nice little place similar to this one.

The Racers hurried over to the modest yard. Hailey opened the gate. Paige led the way up to the porch, opened the screen, rapped on the door, then stepped back. Trevor waited at the bottom porch step. He kept glancing over his shoulder so he could spot the inevitable arrival of the Tanks.

The door was opened by a tall Native American with an athletic build and high, hollow cheekbones. He wore a displeased scowl and remained behind the screen. "Who gave you permission to enter my yard?" he asked in a low voice devoid of humor.

"How were we supposed to knock?" Paige asked defiantly.

"Call from beyond the gate," he said.

"Are you Mr. Graywater?" Claire asked.

"This is the Graywater residence," he said. "I own this mobile home park. Strangers are unwelcome here. That includes solicitors. You kids are trespassing."

Trevor avoided making eye contact with Mr. Graywater. He didn't like the way the conversation was headed. There was still no sign of the Tanks.

"Of course we're strangers," Paige said lightly. "We haven't been introduced. I'm Paige. This is Claire, Hailey, and Trevor."

"William Graywater," he said. "Why are you here?"

"We need the map to the Protector," Paige said simply.

His eyes widened. He looked beyond the kids, as if expecting other enemies. "Who sent you?"

"Why would somebody have to send us?" Hailey asked.

"We need it for a school project," Claire improvised.

"Celia!" William called, his eyes on Paige. "Ted! Horace! Arrista! You know what to do!"

"We're not leaving without it," Paige said. "Make this easy on yourself and

hand it over.”

One of William’s hands disappeared to the side of the door and reappeared with a sword. The long, silvery blade had a slight curve at the tip. From somewhere behind William, Trevor heard the double crunch of somebody working the action of a shotgun, and he took an involuntary step back. William glowered. “We’re ready to protect the guidestone with lethal force. This is your last chance to leave.”

“You’re going to stab us over some map?” Claire asked, annoyed.

“Do you have any idea what I’m protecting?” William challenged incredulously.

“Uweya,” Hailey said matter-of-factly.

“My family has guarded the guidestone for countless generations,” William said. “We have sacrificed much to keep Uweya safe, for if it fell into the wrong hands—”

“Whatever,” Paige said. “We’d rather be stabbed than bored to death.”

William angrily slammed the door.

“Tanks,” Trevor called as Summer, Roman, Derek, and Ruth rushed around the side of the nearest trailer.

“Now what?” Claire asked. “Did you hear the shotgun?”

“We let the Tanks do it,” Trevor said. “Otherwise they could corner us in the trailer. We won’t have much room to maneuver.”

“And lose our stamps?” Paige scoffed. “As if!”

“We’re fast,” Trevor argued. “We can try to swipe it back.”

The girls hesitated.

“Unless you plan to beat the door down, then dodge shotgun blasts with the Tanks on your tail. Do what you want—I’m backing off.”

Trevor ran at his highest speed away from the trailer toward the nearest oak. He heard the girls following.

The Guidestone



Summer watched Trevor speed away from the trailer with the other Racers. They streaked to an oak tree and gathered behind it.

“They want us to do the dirty work,” Roman said.

“I don’t mind doing the work,” Derek said. “But I don’t want them stealing the prize.”

“Did that guy have a sword?” Ruth asked. She had been the final addition to the Tanks. Soon to enter seventh grade, Ruth was thickset and tall for her age. She wore her reddish hair in two short pigtails.

“Looked like it,” Summer said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Roman said. “We have to remember that. Swords, bullets, none of that matters anymore. But we’ll have to watch the Racers. They’re scary fast.”

“Well, we’re scary strong,” Derek said. “Whoever gets the map holds it tight. The rest of us protect it.”

“Sounds like the right idea,” Roman said, striding toward the green and white trailer.

“We don’t want to hurt anybody,” Summer interjected.

“Not permanently,” Roman agreed. “But Racers who don’t want to get hurt shouldn’t mess with Tanks.”

They passed through the gate and walked up to the porch. Roman opened the screen and knocked.

“Go away,” a voice called from inside. “I don’t want to hurt a bunch of kids.”

“We don’t want to hurt a grown-up,” Roman called back. “We’re just here for the map. Open up or we’ll bust the door down.”

“Touch my door and you’ll wish you hadn’t,” the man replied. “Walk

away.”

Roman kicked the door just below the handle. The wood splintered a little, but the door held. Roman kicked it again and the door tore open, ripping away part of the wall with it.

A grim Native American man stood beyond the door, a shiny sword held ready. Behind him was a comfortably furnished combined living room and dining room. Doors led away from the living area on both sides. “That door was reinforced,” he said.

“Not enough,” Roman replied, stepping inside. “Back off.”

“Last warning,” the man said, knuckles tight on his sword handle.

“Go for it,” Derek invited. “Or don’t. Either way, we’re taking the map.”

With a sigh, the man set the sword aside and quickly grabbed Roman. Squirming, Roman seized the man’s arm with both hands, twisted, and hurled him to the ground. Derek pounced, putting him in a headlock.

“Who are you?” the man growled in surprise, grasping at the headlock but unable to wrench it loose.

“We already told you,” Roman said. “We’re the guys taking your map. Just tell us where it is. We don’t want to tear up your house.”

Summer felt sick. She knew they were after the map to try to help John and Mozag, but invading this man’s home was wrong. He had set aside his sword because, regardless of his duty, he didn’t want to chop up a bunch of kids. She had no doubt that he was the noble guardian of a secret that needed to stay hidden. Seeing him on the floor in a chokehold made her want to kick Derek in the face.

“Ease up,” Summer demanded.

Derek looked at her like she was crazy. “Are you kidding? This guy is strong! I can barely hold him.”

“Do it!” the man cried, his voice hoarse because of the stranglehold.

A loud blast sounded from an unseen room, followed by a rumble that Summer could feel through the floor. She and the others all jumped. Then came the unmistakable sound of a shotgun being reloaded.

“Shoot us, stab us,” Roman said, “you can’t stop us.”

A second Native American man dashed into the room with a stun gun in one hand and a hinged club in the other. Wires launched from the stun gun and hit Roman. An instant later, Roman was flopping on the ground.

Ruth charged the man, who raised his padded club and swatted her. The blow glanced off the side of her head but did nothing to slow her as she tackled him to the floor.

Summer stood frozen. She didn’t want to join the fight. The Graywaters

weren't enemies. These were good people defending their home, trying to protect a dangerous secret.

Ruth straddled the man with the hinged club, sitting high on his chest, holding his wrists pinned beside his head. With the current no longer jolting him, Roman jerked the wires from his clothes.

"Are you all right?" Summer asked.

"I'm okay," he replied, leaning over the man in the headlock. "That didn't feel really great. Somebody tries something like that again, we start breaking bones."

The man in the chokehold was red in the face. Tendons stood out in his neck. "You're not children. You're demons in disguise."

Roman shrugged. "Whatever we are, you'd better cough up the map."

An older woman shuffled into the room using a cane. "You want the guidestone? Take it! You'll take it anyway." She held up a smooth stone sphere between her thumb and forefinger.

Roman crossed to her. "A marble?"

"Do you know so little?" the woman replied. "It will lead you to the Protector."

"Arrista, no!" the man in the chokehold protested.

"It's for the best, William," Arrista replied. "If we have lost the cover of our secrecy, we can no longer protect the map."

Roman took out a drawstring bag and withdrew a pinch of Finder's Dust. He let it fall, and the particles drifted away from the woman's hand, toward a doorway opposite from where she had emerged.

"You think you can fool us?" Roman accused.

The woman gave an apologetic smile. "It was worth a try."

The man Ruth straddled made a strangled sound. "Should we start really hurting them?" she asked with frightening casualness.

"Let's start with the old lady," Roman said.

Summer hoped he was bluffing. It was hard to tell.

"No," William said, the word weighted with despair. "We're defeated, I admit it. Don't make them suffer for my failings. You have Finder's Dust. It's only a matter of time before you claim your prize. Release me and I'll give you what you want."

Roman picked up the sword, then nodded at Derek, who released William. Derek positioned himself near Arrista. William stood, rubbing his neck.

"Any tricks, you let them have it," Roman told Derek and Ruth.

"What was with the big boom?" Derek asked.

"Warning shot," Arrista said.

“Then where is the gun?” Roman asked.

“I’ll go check,” Summer said.

She walked past Arrista into a narrow hall with a small bedroom on either side. In one of the bedrooms, acrid smoke hung in the air. Shattered crystal fragments rested on the charred carpeting. A shotgun leaned against the wall.

“I think they destroyed something in here!” Summer called.

Roman trotted over to look. “Great,” he muttered. He turned and raised his voice. “Was that the map? Did you blow up the map?”

William gave a grim chuckle. “If we could destroy the map, our ancestors would have done so long ago.”

“Then what’s the mess in there?” Roman pressed.

“Something valuable,” William replied glumly. “Something private. Something we did not want taken. Something that can never be replaced.”

“We wouldn’t have taken it,” Roman said. “We just want the map. Take us to it. Or should I use the Finder’s Dust?”

“Don’t bother,” William said, leading Roman and Summer to the other side of the living room, where a door gave access to a largish bedroom with a comfortable bathroom attached. William lifted the queen-sized bed, folding it up into the wall. Pulling a rug aside, he revealed a trapdoor.

“Down there?” Roman asked.

In reply, William produced a key, inserted it, and opened the trapdoor. He started down a ladder, then glanced up at Roman. “You coming?”

“Is this an ambush?” Roman asked.

“You have my mother and my brother,” William said. “You are fortified by potent magic. Come on.”

Roman and Summer followed William down the long wooden ladder into a secret cellar. Homemade shelves held canned food supplies. Numerous unmarked crates cluttered the dusty room. Sliding some cans aside, William pulled a loose block from the wall and produced a smooth stone marble like the one his mother had offered.

Roman sprinkled some dust, and almost every particle misted over to the little sphere, dissipating into smoke on contact. “It doesn’t look like a map.”

“That is not my concern,” William said. “Search the house with your dust, if you choose.”

Roman walked around the room, dropping pinches of dust. It all went toward the stone marble. Roman went and took the marble from William.

“Won’t you reconsider?” William asked. “What can your employer offer that is worth granting him power to destroy the world?”

“The guy who sent us is really powerful,” Roman said. “If he wanted to

mess up the world, he could do it on his own.”

William shook his head. “You’re blind. You don’t even know what he’s after. Whatever power your employer possesses is nothing next to Uweya.”

Roman glanced at Summer. For the first time, he seemed a little indecisive.

“Maybe we should just let him go,” Summer said. “Maybe we should let him take the guidestone. We might not get what we’ve gotten ourselves into.”

“I’ve gathered that much,” Roman said. “But he’ll find it again. Our boss. He’ll just send somebody else. Another club. New recruits. His own people.”

“Just because other men would do evil does not mean you must participate,” William said. “Help us stand against your employer.”

Roman shook his head. “I don’t think so. You stay down here. Don’t bug us and we’ll leave quietly.”

“Are you sure?” Summer asked.

“I’m not sure about anything,” Roman snapped. “How do we know this guy isn’t lying? He could be the bad one.”

“A bad guy would have tried to stab you with his sword,” Summer pointed out.

“Maybe,” Roman said. “Maybe not, if he’d already guessed there was no chance to win.”

“Is being a Tank worth it?” Summer asked.

“He made those dolls of us,” Roman said. “Those simu-whatevers. If we turn on him, we’re toast. We just have to hope he wants Uweya for good reasons.”

“Not likely,” William grumbled. “The kind of power Uweya represents should never be unearthed. A wise person would know that.”

Summer knew that Jonas White was a pretty bad guy. He had abducted Mozag and John. Just like his crazy sister, he was luring kids to do his dirty work and selling mind-altering food. But she couldn’t trust Roman not to turn her in if she revealed her true purpose and shared all of her information. Without her, who would monitor the Tanks? “William might have a point,” was all she said.

“Doesn’t matter,” Roman said. “We already chose sides. If Uweya is so powerful, we’re smart to stay on the winning team. If you were going to wimp out, Summer, you shouldn’t have accepted the stamp.”

Sighing, Summer gave William an apologetic glance. “You’re right, Roman. Let’s get out of here.”

Roman started up the ladder first. Summer looked at William intently. “I’m on your side,” she mouthed. “I’ll try to help.”

She wasn’t sure whether he could read her lips. She couldn’t afford to make

Roman suspicious by confirming that William understood. She followed Roman up through the trapdoor. He shut it and pulled the bed down over it.

They returned to the living room. Ruth remained atop the man who had fired the stun gun.

“Did you find it?” Derek asked, standing beside Arrista.

Roman held up the stone marble. “It’s called a guidestone.”

The screen door shifted, and everyone turned to look as a figure blurred into the room. Derek lunged toward the door, but the figure had already charged Roman, who held the guidestone between his thumb and forefinger. A little slow to react, Roman had barely begun to lower his arm by the time the Racer reached him. He had failed to enclose the guidestone in his fist, and the stone marble vanished before he could do so. He reached for the quick figure, but the thief was already beyond his grasp and heading for the door.

Derek, who was standing nearest to the door, had started for it as soon as the screen opened. He made it there just in time to become entangled with the Racer on her way out. Together they tumbled out onto the porch.

Summer ran to the door. Lying on the porch, Derek held Paige tightly. With a flick of her wrist, Paige tossed the guidestone into the yard, where Trevor quickly recovered it.

“Give it back!” Derek yelled. “Give it back now or she gets hurt!” He had one leg across Paige’s shins and gripped both of her forearms.

“You’re already hurting me!” Paige spat. “Get off.”

“Not until we have the map,” Derek insisted.

“Okay,” Trevor said. “You win. Catch.”

Trevor tossed the guidestone underhand to Derek. The stone marble traveled in a high, slow arc. When Derek reached up to catch it, Paige yanked her legs out from under him and darted away. Trevor blurred forward, catching his own throw before it reached Derek, then streaking away before Derek could grab him.

Claire and Hailey dashed forward as well. Whether they meant to intercept the thrown guidestone or help Paige was difficult to tell. But since Trevor had beaten them to the guidestone and Paige had managed to scramble away unaided, they arrived with nothing to do and tried to turn around. The two girls got tangled with each other on the porch steps, slowing them enough that Derek’s desperate swipe at Trevor clipped Claire’s leg.

Squealing and spinning, Claire tumbled down the porch steps, landing on the cement walkway that divided the grass yard. Derek pounced, grabbing her ankle with both hands before she recovered.

“No tricks!” Roman cried, pushing past Summer onto the porch. “No more

games or you'll be sorry!"

"I think he broke my leg," Claire whimpered.

"Don't move," Derek warned.

Trevor looked closely at the guidestone. "What is this? The world's smallest globe? I don't see any markings."

"Give it back," Roman demanded. "Not to Derek. He'll keep hold of Claire. Give it to me, and you guys can leave."

"What do I care about Claire?" Trevor said, putting the guidestone in his pocket. "She's the worst. You can have her. Keep Paige, too, if you can catch her."

Paige and Hailey glared at him.

Roman looked furious. "If you don't give us the guidestone—"

"Do what you want to them," Trevor said. "That's your business. Mine is winning."

Before Roman could reply, Trevor turned and streaked away at top speed.

As Trevor sprinted away from the trailer, he hoped he had made a good choice. He doubted they would hurt Claire. The Tanks were strong, but they were kids. They weren't out for blood. If the guy with the stone they wanted ran off, there would be nobody to threaten and no reason to hold hostages.

As he dashed away, Trevor heard Roman shouting something, the words unintelligibly slow. It didn't matter what he said. By stopping to listen, he would give them a reason to keep harassing Claire. By pretending that he didn't care, he would decrease her value as a hostage and hopefully make her safer.

If he kept hurrying, the Racers should win, which was probably for the best. Trevor had taken some time to think it through while the Tanks were in the mobile home. He had firmly concluded that he would have more luck backstabbing the other Racers than Summer would have betraying the Tanks.

Using his maximum speed, Trevor ran past the trailers, distantly aware of how slowly the rest of the world was moving. Water leaked from a spigot, dripping as if gravity had almost ceased. A few small birds took flight in slow motion, startled by his rapid approach. Everything but him seemed restrained by some invisible force, while he was free to run like normal.

Except the running was making him much more tired than any natural sprint. As the arched DEVIL'S SHADOW entryway came into view, his head started to pound and his lungs burned. It felt as though he had sprinted ten times as far as he had actually run. The day had grown inexplicably hotter, and his mouth was suddenly parched.

Trevor shifted down to normal race mode and reduced his sprint to a jog.

All he had to do was make it to the car. His burst of super speed meant he was well ahead of the Tanks.

Even in normal race mode, moving at a jog almost felt like too much. He knew through practice how much running at top speed sapped his energy. Adrenalized by the need to escape the Tanks, he had stayed at top speed for longer than ever before. He had known that overdoing it could wipe him out, but fear and excitement had driven him to push the limits.

Even at this slower pace, his legs felt rubbery, his head remained sore, and his heart was drumming like a hummingbird's. He began to get dizzy. Wouldn't that be great if he fainted?

Trevor slowed to a quick walk. In race mode, this would still be like a normal run, and his time at top speed had given him a huge head start. A glance back showed nobody following him yet—not Paige, Hailey, or any Tanks.

It was probably best if Paige and Hailey stayed with Claire. They could help her get back to Arcadeland and find the medical care she needed. Had she really broken her leg falling off the porch? It was possible. She had fallen hard.

All Trevor had to do was make it to the car. Then he could rest while the driver sped away. The Tanks would try to pursue him, but with his lead, hopefully they would never catch up. If they did, he would be rested and could escape on foot.

Trevor dropped to his knees and dry heaved. The need hit urgently, leaving him no chance to resist. He briefly wondered how this would look to an observer, watching somebody violently gag in fast motion.

Trevor staggered back to his feet. His muscles remained fatigued, his head woozy. Would it help if he left race mode altogether? But then his walk really would be just a walk. He couldn't risk the Tanks catching up. Race mode had never tired him much more than normal mode. It was the speediest mode that really drained him.

Beyond the arched entrance, Trevor stopped in his tracks. Both cars were still waiting out front. But his was upside down.

What had happened? The Tanks must have flipped it over before they followed the Racers into the trailer park. Was that allowed? He supposed there had been no rules against it.

His driver stood outside the flipped vehicle, leaning against it. He saw Trevor looking and shrugged, hands raised helplessly.

Would the other driver take him? It was worth a try. Motivated by desperation, Trevor picked up his pace and trotted to the car that had brought the Tanks. When he reached the driver's door, he shifted back into normal mode so they could converse.

The driver, a Middle-Eastern man with a scruffy beard, rolled down the window. “Yes?”

“Would you take me back to Arcadeland?” Trevor panted.

“I’m their driver,” the man said. “Not yours. Overturning your car was a dirty trick, but so it goes.”

“I could pay you,” Trevor tried.

With his wrists still on the steering wheel, the driver raised his hands. “I’ve already been paid. I accepted the job. I’m sorry.”

Trevor slumped. His body remained unusually exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep.

What if he sabotaged this car? Let the air out of the tires or something? Would the driver prevent him? Maybe.

Trevor looked back at the trailer park to see all four of the Tanks racing into view, sprinting at their best speed. He shifted back into race mode. He could run off and try to lose them in the wilderness. But he had wrecked his endurance. The thought of running made bile rise in his throat. His head was throbbing a little less, but it still hurt.

Trevor knew from Summer that the Tanks tired slowly. They weren’t fast like a Racer, but they would keep coming. Running at top speed was no longer an option. How long could he last in race mode? Could he get far enough ahead of the Tanks to lose them before he collapsed? If he got away, they’d try to head him off back at Arcadeland.

He turned and started running into the field beside the dirt road. It was worth a try. His legs gave out with no warning, and he sprawled in the brush. The ground swayed as if he were at sea. He lay still for a moment, spitting out dirt and smelling dry weeds.

He couldn’t let them win. So what if his worthless teammates had stacked the odds against him? So what if the Tanks had sabotaged his car? He still had super speed. He would find a way to keep going.

Trevor got up and tried to run. His legs felt leaden. He shuffled along like an old guy who had lost his cane. Still, he kept moving.

Roman came alongside him on one side, Derek on the other. A strong hand clamped down on his shoulder. Only then did Trevor realize he was no longer in race mode. When had he slipped out of it? When had he fallen? It was hard to be sure.

Trevor stopped, his legs wobbly, and held out the guidestone on his palm. Roman claimed it and shoved him to the ground. Trevor felt no desire to rise.

The Resistance



Nate awoke to the sound of somebody tapping on his window with a coin. It took only a moment for him to realize that it must be an emergency. After kicking off his covers, Nate crossed to the window to find Summer outside.

He opened it. “What’s up?”

“We got the map,” Summer said. “The Racers lost. I’m worried about Trevor.”

“What time is it?” Nate wondered.

“After midnight.”

“Let me get dressed and I’ll come down.”

Summer nodded and walked carefully away from the window, shingles groaning and splitting under her augmented weight. She jumped off the roof and plummeted out of sight.

Nate changed into jeans and a T-shirt, then added a light jacket. He put on his shoes and glided out the window and down to Summer.

“What happened to Trevor?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” Summer said. “We were out at some trailer park getting the map to the Protector, which turned out to be a little round rock called the guidestone.”

“Okay.”

“Trevor had the stone,” she said. “He almost beat us singlehandedly, even though his teammates messed up. But I guess he ran at his top speed for too long and wiped himself out. We didn’t get much chance to talk. Anyhow, we got the stone back from him. Both clubs had gone to the trailer park in cars. We had flipped the Racers’ car upside down to mess them up, but then we flipped it back once we had the guidestone, so the driver could take them home. The car was busted up, but it still worked.”

“Then what?”

“One of the Racers tried to steal the guidestone back, but Roman held tight, and she hurt her wrist. By the end, Paige had a sprained wrist and Claire had injured her leg pretty bad. It took the fight out of them. They went back in their car. But Trevor refused. He just took off into a field.”

“Probably smart,” Nate said. “Pigeon disappeared after his club lost.”

“Right,” Summer said. “But Trevor still hasn’t shown up at his house.”

“Wait, when did you guys turn in the guidestone?”

“Around eight o’clock. Afterward, I kept looking for Trevor. I just came here from his house. I’m worried he won’t ever show up. And I’m worried that we’re getting too deep into this without solving anything. I keep waiting for a chance to sneak into the secret parts of Arcadeland, and that chance keeps not coming. We lost Pigeon. We’re no closer to finding John. We can’t let Jonas White get Uweya.”

Nate patted her shoulder. “Maybe we should go talk farther away. I don’t want to wake up my parents.”

She looked at him like he was being ridiculous. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“What?”

“Our parents are all zombified. It’s just like with Mrs. White. They can’t get enough of that nacho cheese. He’s been targeting them with taco carts—Arcadeland Taco Fiesta. My dad brought some of their food home tonight.”

Nate thought about it. He’d been generally avoiding his family, partly because he’d been busy at the training center, and partly because he didn’t want them placing limits on his excursions. Nobody had raised a complaint about the long hours he’d been away. When he had spoken with them, they had been calm and easygoing. “I should have known,” he said.

“He’s had my dad in a daze for a couple of days,” Summer said. “Just one more reason we need to take him down.”

Nate nodded. “You want to go look for Trevor? Or should we wait at his house? How far away were you?”

“It was a pretty far drive,” Summer said. “Almost an hour. But as a Racer, he should have been back by now. I think we should talk to Mr. Stott.”

“That’s a good idea. We’ve gotten out of touch with him. So, you guys are going to be Racer Tanks?”

“Huh? Because we earned the racecar stamp?”

Nate held out his hand. “They have a lady who can blend two stamps so they work together. We’re all Jet Subs now. I can hardly imagine going up against Racer Tanks.”

Summer raised her eyebrows. “Don’t let my teammates get ahold of you.

They play rough.”

“I believe you.”

“Will they be able to blend all four stamps?” Summer wondered.

“The lady told us she could barely handle two,” Nate replied. “I guess that’s the limit. You’ll find out about it when you go in to refresh your stamp.”

“Tomorrow morning,” Summer said. “Did you and Lindy meet with the Battiatos?”

“Yeah,” Nate said. “There’s no news on Pigeon. Nothing new at all, really.”

They walked to the candy shop and went to the back door. A light was on, so Nate knocked gently. Mr. Stott answered a moment later, a steaming mug of hot chocolate in one hand, eyes anxious as he glanced beyond them into the night. “Come inside,” he urged. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Mr. Stott closed the door behind them.

“We’re worried about Trevor,” Summer said.

Mr. Stott raised the mug. “I’m less worried now.”

“He’s here?” Nate asked.

Mr. Stott motioned with the mug for them to follow him. He led them up to the apartment, where Lindy greeted them. “This is turning into a party,” she said.

“Where’s Trevor?” Summer asked.

“He’s in my sanctum,” Mr. Stott said.

“Your sanctum?” Nate asked.

“The heart of my lair,” Mr. Stott explained. “The most protected space. Magically, it’s cut off from the rest of the universe. He may have to stay put for a while.”

“Jonas White shouldn’t be able to reach him there,” Lindy added. “Even the simulacrum shouldn’t work.”

“Shouldn’t or can’t?” Nate checked.

Mr. Stott rubbed the side of his beard. “It would require a massive amount of skill and energy to overwhelm the barriers that protect my sanctum, but it is possible.”

“Can we see him?” Summer asked.

“Sure,” Mr. Stott said. He led them down a short hall to a modest room. Trevor sat on the edge of a futon.

“Hey, guys,” Trevor said, brightening as Nate and Summer entered. “You’re up late.”

“How long have you been here?” Summer asked.

Trevor glanced over at a clock. “About four hours.”

“You got here quickly,” Summer said. “You ran?”

“Part of the way,” Trevor said. “Not a lot. I took it easy at first. I needed

some time to recover from pushing too hard back at the trailer park. Once I was feeling good, I used my speed to sneak into the back of a pickup truck.”

“Couldn’t you have just run the whole way?” Nate asked.

“In theory, I guess,” Trevor said. “But even though to you guys I go super fast, to me I’m still moving at my normal speed. A long run is still tiring and boring. We must have been at least thirty miles from here. That’s a long way to jog.”

“So you used your speed to secretly hitch rides,” Summer said.

“Pretty much,” Trevor said. “Then I bailed when the cars went the wrong way. If I use my top speed, I’m faster than cars on the freeway. But I can only keep it up in short bursts, or it wipes me out.”

“He took a risk,” Mr. Stott said. “Until Trevor reached this sanctum, Jonas might have used the simulacrum to harm him at any time. Apparently Jonas didn’t figure out that Trevor was on the run until after he found sanctuary here.”

“So now he has to stay?” Nate asked.

“Or he risks magical retaliation,” Mr. Stott said. “To exit this sanctum would leave him exposed.”

“I’m worried that I’ll get the rest of you in trouble,” Trevor said. “If they track me here, it’ll mean problems for Mr. Stott. And Jonas knows I was involved with Nate, Lindy, and Summer. He’ll be watching all of us more carefully.”

“It’s a risk I’m happy to take,” Mr. Stott said.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nate said. “I’d much rather take a little more heat than have you vanish like Pigeon.”

“I worry about Pigeon too,” Trevor said with frustration. “If I had let myself get caught, maybe I could have found him and helped him.”

“More likely you’d just be in the same trouble as him,” Lindy said.

“I’m worried about how far Jonas is getting in this search for Uweya,” Summer said. “I helped take a map from a family that has guarded it for a long time. They seemed really worried about what would happen if Jonas found Uweya.”

“I haven’t been able to learn much about Uweya,” Mr. Stott said. “I’ve consulted all of my usual resources, but there is almost no information about what it does or how it can be found. Jonas must have gone to great lengths to learn anything about it.”

“I felt bad about taking the Gate from the Hermit,” Nate said. “If all of this adds up to Jonas getting Uweya, I think we’re doomed.”

“What’s your next mission?” Mr. Stott asked.

“Probably to get the Protector,” Summer said. “The map we got will

supposedly lead us to it.”

“What is the Protector?” Mr. Stott inquired.

“I don’t really know,” Summer said.

“They’ll tell us more when we get the mission,” Nate guessed.

“Only two clubs left,” Mr. Stott mused. “That would lead me to assume you are approaching the end of the treasure hunt.”

“It feels that way,” Summer said. “As far as we know, the next challenge after getting the Protector could be to find Uweya.”

“Or you might just be gathering the tools Jonas needs,” Mr. Stott speculated. “He may not involve the clubs in retrieving the actual prize.”

“We need to start fighting back before it’s too late,” Nate said. “But how? With those wax statues, Jonas can take us down whenever he wants!”

“Watch for opportunities,” Mr. Stott advised. “I’m working on a project that might be of service. I just hope I can finish it in time.”

“New candy?” Nate said hopefully.

Mr. Stott nodded. “Something that might help you get around without Jonas using the simulacra against you.”

“Has the Flatman seen anything useful?” Nate wondered, referring to the mutant that Mr. Stott kept floating in a shallow aquarium of formaldehyde. The Flatman had offered some useful predictions back when they were dealing with Belinda White.

“He has been silent of late,” Mr. Stott said. “His activity has always been unpredictable. For now, your best bet is to keep playing along. I’ll keep working on my new treat. But stay vigilant! Remember the Battiatos if you need backup. We need to find John and Mozag. And, at all cost, we need to keep Jonas White from obtaining Uweya.”

Pigeon leapt to his feet when his cell door opened. Cleon looked in, wearing a red vest over a white shirt. “You want that shower?”

Pigeon had not yet left his cell. Living underground without windows, he found it tricky to judge how much time had passed. He estimated it had been more than a day. Whenever a meal was brought he asked for a shower. Until now, his keepers had not acknowledged his requests.

“Really?” Pigeon asked.

Cleon hooked a thumb in the front pocket of his jeans. “Nobody likes a smelly kid.”

“Great,” Pigeon said, wishing he felt less flustered by the opportunity. He was no fan of Cleon, but it was refreshing to see a familiar face. Pigeon had no prior association with either of the men who had brought his meals. “Do I have

to wear handcuffs?”

Cleon chuckled. “That won’t be necessary. Come on.”

Pigeon walked out of the cell. So far, anxiety had been the worst part of his incarceration. The cell stayed at a livable temperature, the cot was reasonably comfortable, and the food tasted all right. Nothing was great, but nothing was horrible.

His biggest frustration had come from his inability to accomplish anything. He had hoped that becoming a prisoner might give him access to useful secrets, but so far all he had managed to do was sleep, eat, pace, and stew.

Cleon escorted him down the hall. Pigeon appreciated his ability to move his gaze around rather than having it fixed. He could not help noticing how far the hall extended in both directions, and how many cell doors it contained.

“Big prison,” Pigeon said conversationally.

“Yeah,” Cleon replied.

“Do you guys keep a lot of people here?”

“Not many,” Cleon replied. “The boss doesn’t do things halfway. There are whole wings that I doubt we’ll ever use.”

They turned a corner and Cleon led Pigeon to an unmarked door. “You’ll have the whole place to yourself. I’ll wait out here. I don’t have all day. Make it snappy.”

“I’ll hurry,” Pigeon promised. “Do I just put my same clothes back on?”

“For now, yeah,” Cleon said. “We’ll look into finding something else.”

Pigeon passed through the door into a large locker room. Long fluorescent lights cast an even radiance onto the tile floor. He found soap, shampoo, conditioner, and a folded towel on a bench between rows of lockers. Proceeding to a large communal shower, Pigeon chose a nozzle and turned on the water. He checked the temperature with his hand and adjusted the knobs a couple of times, then stepped into the spray.

Despite the wide, eerily empty room and the guard waiting outside to return him to his cell, Pigeon felt his body relax as warm water gushed over him. With a small sniff, he tried to breathe the water and immediately began coughing. The sub stamp had worn off.

After a few moments wallowing in the relaxing sensation, he remembered his promise to Cleon and grabbed the soap. Pigeon hummed as he washed. Then he started singing. The echo off the bare walls helped his voice sound better than usual. He started getting into it, loudly singing the national anthem, until he imagined Cleon laughing at him out in the hall. Hopefully the door would serve to muffle his voice, but Pigeon decided not to take any chances.

When he finished, Pigeon shut off the water and grabbed his towel. The air

felt cooler after the warm spray, so he hurried and pulled on his clothes while he was still too wet, causing his shirt and pants to stick uncomfortably to his skin. Once he was presentable, Pigeon exited the locker room to find Cleon waiting.

“How fast do you think you were?” Cleon asked.

“Pretty fast,” Pigeon said.

“I thought you’d fallen asleep until you serenaded me,” Cleon said.

“I liked the echo,” Pigeon explained.

“I could tell,” Cleon chuckled. “Let’s get you back to that comfy cell. I bet you’ve got an echo in there, too. Have you tried it out?”

“I’m never singing again,” Pigeon said, his cheeks hot.

“Don’t squander your talent,” Cleon said. “I think you’ve got a future! Next time you shower, I just might charge admission. Maybe we’ll play a ball game afterward. Come on.”

They began to retrace their steps to Pigeon’s cell. When they reached Pigeon’s hall, loud footfalls sounded behind them. Pigeon and Cleon turned at the same time.

A man charged down the hall toward them. A large man, with broad shoulders and a strong jaw. His shoes slapped the floor unapologetically. An unbuttoned overcoat flapped behind him like a cape. The man was not wearing his customary fedora, but it was definitely John Dart.

“Great,” Cleon muttered. He gave Pigeon a shove that almost knocked him over. “Go to your cell.”

Pigeon didn’t obey. He wasn’t about to miss a chance to see John.

Cleon stepped around the corner, out of John’s view. Then Cleon suddenly teleported four feet to one side.

Pigeon blinked. “How’d you do that?”

Cleon waved him away. “Scram.”

Pigeon could hear that John had almost caught up with them. He backed away a few paces.

John raced around the corner and without hesitation threw a hard punch at Cleon’s face. The blow passed right through Cleon’s head, as if he possessed no more substance than a hologram. The lack of contact left John off balance. Cleon lashed out with his leg, and even though the kick came nowhere near to striking John, the detective doubled over. A few feet to the side of John, Cleon punched. Without any visible impact, John staggered back.

John skipped several steps to one side and closed his eyes, knees bent, fists ready. “Go ahead, hit me again,” John invited.

Cleon frowned. He stepped forward quietly, not directly toward John.

“He’s coming,” Pigeon said.

John shushed him. "I know."

"He's not where he seems to be," Pigeon said.

While John made a motion for Pigeon to keep silent, Cleon lunged forward and threw a punch that looked to have no chance of landing. John's head snapped back and he stumbled away, hands raised defensively.

"Keep talking, Pigeon," Cleon invited. "Stamp your feet. Sing us a song."

Pigeon realized that John had been relying on his ears to hear Cleon approach. Pigeon clamped both hands over his mouth.

John turned to face Cleon's voice, which originated from somewhere to the side of his visible mouth. As soon as Cleon stopped speaking, he slunk quietly to one side, stepping carefully.

John still had his eyes closed, apparently to avoid interaction with the distracting illusion. Pigeon felt tempted to explain where Cleon was moving, but held his tongue. If John wanted to see, he could simply open his eyes.

"A little less bold this time," John said.

Cleon didn't respond. He was creeping forward, fists raised. Pigeon couldn't hear him.

Lunging to the left of John, Cleon threw another punch that didn't look like it could connect. John made a blocking motion and seemed to trap something invisible. He swung the invisible attacker into the wall, both men grunting with the impact.

The illusion of Cleon disappeared and his actual form became visible, his arm trapped by John. Cleon tried to twist away, but John landed a brutal punch that sent him sprawling. John flinched as he issued the blow, and blood began gushing from one nostril.

Pigeon winced. John had a huge disadvantage in any fight—he suffered any injury that he inflicted on another. If he broke some guy's arm, his arm broke as well. If John punched a guy, he received the same damage.

"If you wanted to hurt me, you should have just let me hit you," John said, wiping away blood with the back of his hand. "It would have saved us time."

A siren began to wail.

"He's on to you," Cleon said from the floor.

John kicked Cleon in the side, doubling over as he issued the blow. "This way, Pigeon," John grunted, running back the way he had come.

Pigeon followed as fast as he could. A hand to his side, John slowed his pace, allowing Pigeon to keep up.

"Hurry, Pigeon," John said. "We're both in danger."

"Where have you been?" Pigeon exclaimed.

"Here," John said. "Faster, Pigeon."

“This is my fastest.”

Slowing, John scooped Pigeon up and heaved him over his shoulder. Then he sprinted down the hall, breathing hard, his footfalls echoing.

They turned a corner. Pigeon could hear angry shouts from behind. There were fewer doors in this hall, longer stretches of blank cement walls. John ran to an iron door, shoved it open, and staggered inside.

An old man closed the door. He was short, with bushy sideburns and a bald spot atop his head. It was Mozag.

John dumped Pigeon onto his feet, then slouched against the wall. Blood continued to drain from his nose, coming fast from one nostril and slow from the other.

“You cut it close,” Mozag said. “I can feel it in the air. He’s already working on your simulacrum.”

“Close suffices,” John said.

“What’s going on?” Pigeon asked.

“Welcome to the resistance,” Mozag said with a smile.

“The resistance?” Pigeon asked.

Mozag motioned at the surrounding apartment, which was much larger and better furnished than Pigeon’s cell. “This is our special corner of Jonas White’s prison. I’ve claimed it as my own.”

Groaning, John pushed off the wall and walked out of the room. He returned with a washcloth held to his face. “Mozag made this an impromptu lair,” John said with admiration. “A sanctum, actually. Few mages could have pulled it off. I don’t think Jonas realized that such a feat was possible. No outside magic can touch us here. And nobody has managed to bother us. They learned quickly not to go up against a wizard like Mozag in his lair.”

“They forgot about us,” Mozag said. “Well, not completely. We haven’t been aggressive lately. They stopped being careful—enough for John to make a foray and recover you.”

“How did you know I was here?” Pigeon asked.

Mozag raised his eyebrows. “Wasn’t easy. Once I cut this room off from outside magic, I couldn’t reach out from here in most of the standard ways. Isolation was the price of security. But we have an ally here, an experienced magician named Tallah. She can blend incongruous magic like nobody else. She’s a prisoner as well. Jonas let her establish her quarters as a provisional lair because he needs her magical expertise, but she has no sanctum.”

“I haven’t met her,” Pigeon said.

“No,” Mozag agreed. “One of her hobbies is creating tiny spies to prowl these halls. They look like mosquitoes or gnats. Delicate work. The barriers of

my sanctum prevent her from reaching out to me directly, so she sends her miniscule spies to my door. They can't enter on their own, but we can bring them in ourselves. Crossing the barrier damages them, but once we have them inside, I'm able to revive them enough to experience what they've seen."

"Plus, the guy who brings our food is terrified of Mozag," John explained. "You have to understand, Mozag is both famous and infamous in the magical community. Nobody is eager to cross him. Our food guy delivers messages for us now and then to Tallah. Once we realized that you were here, we asked Tallah to monitor your specific door. She did, and a gnat made it here just in time for me to attempt a rescue."

"So when you came after me," Pigeon realized, "you'd left the safety of the sanctum behind."

"Temporarily, yes," John said. "Jonas no longer leaves guards on our door. We've found ways to harass them."

"We can open the door and throw things at them," Mozag chuckled.

"But Jonas monitors this hall, of course," John continued. "He just does it magically. He doesn't get around very fast. I was betting that I could snatch you and make it back here before Jonas arrived at my simulacrum."

"A very risky wager," Mozag mentioned. "If by chance Jonas had been close to John's simulacrum at the time, the rescue would have ended differently. After the trouble we've caused, given the chance, Jonas would probably just skip the lesser punishments and kill him."

"He could do that?" Pigeon asked in a small voice.

"Jonas White is a very gifted Simulcrist," Mozag said. "With simulacra of the quality that he possesses, not only could he kill us, he could probably reach out through us and harm the people we most love."

"Wow," Pigeon said. "Is there any way you could take him on?"

Mozag shook his head. "Not directly. Not here in his lair. Not with him in possession of our simulacra. That's why our strategy has been almost entirely defensive."

"Mozag can't leave this apartment or the sanctum would collapse," John said. "There is no permanence to it. This sanctum was created as an emergency measure without the necessary time, materials, or support. It is maintained more by his willpower than anything."

"Indirectly we might be able to serve a purpose," Mozag said. "Simulcra of the sort Jonas is performing with his wax figures requires a massive amount of magical power. Somewhere in his lair he is hiding a power source. If we could locate his Source, we would know how to break his hold on us."

"What about those gnats and mosquitoes?" Pigeon asked. "The little spies?"

“A good thought,” Mozag said. “Tallah has tried. We’re fairly certain Jonas keeps his Source in his sanctum. It’s also where he keeps his wax figures. His waxworks factory is located here on this level, but no magic can penetrate it. To investigate, we would have to physically go there.”

“Can we?” Pigeon wondered.

“In theory,” Mozag said. “But the moment we set foot beyond this sanctum, we become vulnerable. The waxworks creation area is sealed by a stout door and protected by a monstrosity. It will not be an easy place to spy.”

Pigeon sighed. “So for now there’s not much we can do. We’re trapped.”

“For the present, yes,” John agreed. He laid a large hand on Pigeon’s shoulder. “Come sit down.”

Pigeon noticed John wince, a faint tightening around his eyes. “You’re still hurt.”

“I’m all right. Part of the job. I might have overdone that kick to the side a little. It happens.”

“You beat up Cleon pretty bad. He didn’t chase us. How could you still run?”

John almost smiled. “I’ve been doing this for a long time, Pigeon. I’ve built up a high pain tolerance. I’ve learned to keep going despite my injuries. I know how much I can take, and I try not to dish out more than I can handle. I also have a physical advantage—even though I have to suffer any harm I inflict, I heal much faster than a normal person.”

“You haven’t healed yet,” Pigeon noted, sitting down on a couch.

“Not yet,” John agreed. “It’ll pass.”

“Would you care for some sunflower seeds?” Mozag asked.

“I’m all right,” Pigeon said.

“Hummus?” Mozag tried. “Not the best, but edible. Or we could do popcorn. I have a microwave.”

“Maybe later,” Pigeon said. “How do you have all this food? Why doesn’t Jonas starve you out?”

“He tried,” John said. “He cut our power and water, didn’t bring us food. Mozag can’t work magic beyond this sanctum. But he can do a lot here. Mozag started shaking up the sanctum pretty hard. See the cracks in the walls? The magic didn’t travel beyond the sanctum, but the physical shockwaves did. It felt like an earthquake throughout the building. Jonas couldn’t have it interrupting business. So we struck a deal.”

Mozag chuckled. “We got power, water, and food—and the tremors ceased.”

“How did he catch you two in the first place?” Pigeon asked.

Mozag's face fell. "Don't remind me. It was a low point of my career."

"Mine too," John grumbled. "And it was my fault."

"I don't like to place blame," Mozag said. "John is an excellent operative. But if you demand that I speak candidly, yes, he's mostly to blame." Mozag winked at Pigeon.

"What happened?" Pigeon wondered.

"Jonas learned that I was here investigating him," John said. "He laid a trap. You remember Kyle Knowles?"

"Of course," Pigeon said. "He was one of the kids who helped Mrs. White. He got changed into an old man. You guys cured him."

"Kyle didn't set me up deliberately," John said. "He started visiting Arcadeland when it first opened. Jonas recognized that he had experienced some magical tampering. A trained eye could spot similar residual evidence on Nate. Jonas did some digging and suspected that Kyle had been connected to me and Mrs. White. He offered Kyle a job here—regular employment, no magic involved. Then he made a simulacrum of Kyle."

"Jonas really is an outstanding Simulcrist," Mozag inserted. "He can work some very nuanced enchantments."

"Tell me about it," John muttered. "He worked a subtle spell, using careful acupuncture on the simulacrum to put Kyle in a highly suggestible state. Sort of like hypnosis in the movies. He created a fictitious scenario that Kyle believed completely. Kyle unwittingly played right into his hands. He called me and asked for my help. He asked me to meet him in a vacant office not far from here. It was an ambush. They overwhelmed me, took my hat, and made a simulacrum of me."

"Tell him the rest," Mozag prompted.

"Jonas then did to me what he had done to Kyle," John grumbled. "In one of my greatest failures since I started working as a magical investigator, I lured Mozag here, and they trapped him."

"And they took my hat too!" Mozag complained, as if it were the biggest tragedy of all. "My Cubs hat! The one I magically reinforced to last indefinitely. They crafted a simulacrum of me. But before Jonas completed it, I freed John and turned this apartment into a sanctum. We've been here ever since."

"What was it like?" Pigeon asked John. "Being hypnotized?"

"I can hardly recall," John said. "It's like a half-forgotten dream. But the circumstances they planted in my mind felt completely authentic. I believed that I had escaped Jonas and was facing a desperate emergency where Mozag had to personally intervene. Trusting my judgment, Mozag came exactly where Jonas wanted him."

“And here we sit,” Mozag said. “In some ways I’m glad to be here. I make it a point of knowing the different ways magic could obliterate the world. An unscrupulous magician gaining control of Uweya is one of the bleakest scenarios. I just wish I were in a better position to intervene.”

“Nate, Summer, and Trevor are trying to help us,” Pigeon said. “I’m glad you rescued me, John, but I’m worried that now Jonas will know for sure that we’re all working against him.”

“Will that be a problem?” John asked Mozag.

“Jonas does his homework,” Mozag said. “He already knew Pigeon and the others had been involved with me, Sebastian, and John. He’s using the four kids in spite of that knowledge. Who else is on our side, Pigeon?”

“Mr. Stott and Lindy are on the case as well, along with the Battiato brothers.”

“Victor and Ziggy,” Mozag said with a grin. “Not my most subtle operatives, but they can be quite effective.”

“Do they know you’re here?” John asked.

“I’m not sure,” Pigeon said, pulling out his button. “They gave me this.”

Mozag took it from him and held it up, examining it closely. “A very talented magician made this tracking beacon. Me. My sanctum is completely and unavoidably blocking the signal. The wards Jonas put in place would probably interfere with it as well. But I expect we could find a way to boost the transmission.” Mozag closed his hand around the button. “Well done hanging on to this, Pigeon. It gives us hope.”

“I’m glad,” Pigeon said.

“Are you positive you don’t want popcorn?” Mozag asked. “I have some real butter in the fridge.”

Now that he was settling down, Pigeon already felt hungrier than he had before. “Sure, why not?”

Lighthouse



Hovering in an upper corner of the room, Nate reflected that the training facility seemed much less busy when occupied by only two clubs. He kept catching the other Jets glancing nervously at the Tanks. It was one thing to watch the rival club sling around heavy weights and abuse punching bags, and another to see them perform the same workouts in fast-forward. The Jets knew they were in trouble. How were they supposed to match up against opponents who were both drastically stronger and considerably faster?

Nate hoped the next assignment would involve water. If not, their second stamp would be worthless. If so, by staying in the water and the sky, hopefully the Jets could partially negate the rival club's advantages.

"Nate!" Chris called. "Wake up!"

They were running a drill in which they practiced going from air to water and back to air again while retrieving rings. Nate stretched a fist ahead of himself and flew forward, curving near the wall to snatch a ring, then diving toward the pool. He broke the surface of the water, slowing only slightly as he skimmed the bottom to nab three more rings, then angled back up into the air, accelerating as he rose. His hair, skin, and clothes dried instantly, and he snagged a ring from the ceiling before joining the other Jets floating in the center of the room.

"Well done," Chris applauded. "You're getting the hang of this."

"I hope so," Nate said. "I don't envy those punching bags."

Derek currently thundered away at a heavy bag, his blurred fists attacking like machine-gun bullets. The bag jerked and jolted under the fierce onslaught.

"They can't fly," Risa reminded everyone. "And they can't torpedo through water."

"Hopefully that will matter," Nate said. "I don't want to be part of the next club that disappears."

“You guys still haven’t seen Pigeon?” Chris asked.

“Not since his club lost,” Nate said gloomily. He had started sharing some information about Pigeon’s disappearance with Chris and Risa in hopes that they might eventually turn into true allies against Jonas. “His parents have no idea he’s been gone. They’ve been eating Arcadeland tacos and nachos.”

“I was paying more attention to my parents,” Risa said. “You’re right that they seem really distracted. I told them I was going to drive Dad’s car to the mall and they told me to be careful. Mom even handed me the keys. It was like they had no idea how many years it’ll be before I’m old enough to get a license.”

“My parents are out of it too,” Chris said. “Way more than usual.”

“I tried to find the Racers this morning,” Lindy said. “It was early, before dawn, and nobody was home.”

“We need to keep our guard up on all sides,” Nate said. “We know the Tanks will be gunning for us. But I’m not sure how much we can trust Jonas, either.”

“You’ve worked with magicians like him before?” Risa asked.

Nate had only dropped some hints. He didn’t want to risk telling them too much and having it get back to Jonas. “I have. Some are good, but I’ve met one who wanted to take over the world. To me, Jonas seems more like the scary kind.”

“I definitely didn’t like those wax statues,” Risa admitted. “Truth? I almost bailed when I saw mine. I mean, how creepy is that?”

Cleon and Todd entered the building. The Jets gazed down at them, and the Tanks stopped exercising.

“Today?” Chris asked. “Already? These guys aren’t messing around.”

“Jonas wants his treasure,” Nate murmured. “Let’s go hear what they have to tell us.”

Using their speed, the Tanks reached Cleon and Todd before the Jets, but not too far ahead. “What’s up?” Roman asked.

“Mr. White wants to talk with both clubs,” Cleon said. The whole area around his nose looked bruised.

“What happened to your face?” Chris asked.

Cleon tenderly rubbed his upper lip. “Basketball. I didn’t see it coming until the last second.”

“We shouldn’t keep Mr. White waiting,” Todd suggested.

They all followed Todd and Cleon out of the training facility and back to Arcadeland. They entered through a side door, and Todd led them to a conference room where Jonas White awaited, seated at the head of a long table. Katie Sung flanked him on one side, a muscular man with black spiky hair on

the other.

Jonas gestured at the table. "Please, take a seat."

The Jets and Tanks sat on opposite sides of the table. The chairs were comfy and swiveled. Cleon and Todd remained in the room, standing near the door.

"Our competition is getting exciting," Jonas commented with a slow smile. "Two teams, both powered up more than ever. And the toughest mission yet lies ahead."

Jonas held up a smooth stone marble. "This is the guidestone the Tanks brought to me. Was it only yesterday? How can something so small change so much in such a short time? I have yearned to know the location of the Protector for ages, and now I do, thanks to this remarkable little wayfinder."

He placed the ball on the table, and it immediately rolled diagonally toward Katie Sung, who caught it as it fell off the edge. She handed it back to Jonas.

"Whenever we set the guidestone on a relatively flat surface," Jonas went on, "it rolls toward the Protector. Simple, elegant, and effective."

"Do we have to share it?" Roman asked, looking across the table at Chris.

"No," Jonas said. "The guidestone will go to the Jets."

"What?" Roman exclaimed, hopping to his feet. "How is that fair?" Derek had risen as well.

"I appreciate your competitive spirit," Jonas soothed. "However, I also appreciate order and decorum. Perhaps in the future you could allow me to offer a full explanation before issuing an objection."

Although Jonas remained calm and polite, Katie and the spiky-haired guy glared at Roman with naked disapproval. After glancing at Derek, Roman sat.

Jonas softly cleared his throat. "We have already used the guidestone to trace a path to the Protector's hiding place. As I have long suspected, the location was not far from here. I have avidly studied these matters since well before your grandparents were born. Decades ago, I learned that the Protector resided within an ancient structure dubbed the Lodestar of the West, or the Great Western Pharos—a magnificent lighthouse somewhere on the western coast of North America. An ancient structure that had no business standing here, given all we know of the region's history."

"It's nearby?" Lindy asked.

"At first I was looking for ruins," Jonas said. "I found nothing. But then I realized a truth that the guidestone confirmed—the lighthouse is submerged."

Roman huffed, folding his arms, clearly frustrated. But he kept his mouth shut.

Jonas nodded at Roman. "As the Tanks recognize, this provides a certain

advantage to the Jets, who now also share the attributes of the Subs. Please hold all complaints until after the full briefing. As you will see, the Tanks are not yet out of the running.” Pushing against the arms of his chair, Jonas attempted to rise. He paused halfway up, trembling, and then managed to straighten. “Until now, your trials have been preparatory. I knew retrieving the Gate would provide a challenge, but I doubted that it would prove fatal. Same with the retrieval of the guidestone. That all changes with this assignment.”

Nate leaned forward in his seat. All around him listened raptly.

“The Gate has changed hands many times over the centuries,” Jonas related. “The Protector remains where it was first hidden, cleverly guarded. Learning that the Graywater family held the secret to its location was the most difficult part of this entire puzzle. Through my research, I know some of the dangers that await. Having come this far, given the risk you will take, you ought to know some of what I have learned. But only if you mean to continue. Only if you are fully committed. This next assignment will be life-threatening. I do not make a habit of wasting my time. I believe you can succeed. But I will not compel any to proceed. If you wish to abandon the treasure hunt at this point, please let me know immediately.”

Nate looked at Summer and Lindy. Many of the kids around the table exchanged wary glances. Nobody backed out.

“Very well,” Jonas continued. “Once we have both the Gate and the Protector, we will be in position to go after Uweya itself. Claiming the Protector will be no easy matter. The Lodestar of the West is submerged off the coast of Yerba Buena Island in the San Francisco Bay. This is the island motorists encounter while traversing the Bay Bridge. It adjoins a man-made islet dubbed Treasure Island. Much of the area has been owned by the U.S. Navy, although naval operations there have decreased in recent years.”

“How deep is the lighthouse?” Roman asked.

“The San Francisco Bay is not particularly deep,” Jonas said. “At the same time, our lost monument must be fairly deep to have avoided discovery. The particulars are for the Jets to discover. They will let the guidestone lead them. Much about the guidestone remains a mystery to me. I know that the Graywater family has watched over it for generations. In my studies, I most often found it referenced as a map, but also as a key, a compass, a lodestone, and a simulacrum. Before this mission is over, the Jets will know more about the subject than I do.”

“The first club to bring the Protector back to Arcadeland wins?” Nate checked.

“Correct,” Jonas said. “But there is a catch. The Protector resides within an

ancient chest. The chest is not light, and it will not open in close quarters. The Protector will be difficult to extract from the chest. I do not want the chest. I want the Protector.”

“They won’t be able to open the chest underwater?” Roman inquired.

“Very doubtful,” Jonas said. “The chest is temperamental and dangerous. It was designed by Iwa Iza himself. According to legend, wherever it opens is where it will remain. I do not want it opened within ten miles of Arcadeland. I will provide a map to dispel any ignorance regarding that boundary. Failure to open the chest far enough away will result in disqualification. In addition, I want the chest opened in a remote area. The map also identifies areas I consider too close to civilization for opening the chest. Again, failure to comply will result in disqualification. Do we understand one another so far?”

Nobody dissented.

“The Jets begin with a decided advantage,” Jonas said. “They get the guidestone, and they will enjoy a lack of competition retrieving the chest. To balance out this advantage, I have fashioned bracelets for the Jets to wear. Though

unobtrusive, the bracelets will enable the Tanks to track their opponents.”

“What?” Chris exclaimed.

“As if you get to whine,” Roman snapped.

“Save it, Roman,” Chris said. “The guidestone isn’t an advantage. It just means the Jets have to do all the heavy lifting. How is it fair that after we salvage the chest from the lighthouse, you get to know where you can come to steal it?”

“Sounds about right to me,” Derek said.

“How heavy is this chest?” Nate wondered. “Will we be able to move it far?”

“It will probably be heavy,” Jonas said. “I don’t know how far you’ll be able to transport it.”

“This is ridiculous,” Chris muttered.

Roman shook his head. “You’ll still have the advantage.”

“Give me a break,” Chris huffed. “Rested and ready, you get to swoop in and take something you couldn’t have gotten yourselves.”

“Enough debate,” Jonas said. “These are the rules for this mission. There is no room for negotiation. Either participate or quit.”

Silence followed the ultimatum.

“When do we start?” Nate finally asked.

“At nightfall,” Jonas said. “Both clubs will set out from here tonight. The Tanks will have the same driver who took them to Devil’s Shadow. He will go

wherever they direct. They are free to abandon him at their discretion. The Jets will take to the sky. I'll wait for a winner to return with the prize."

"And if some of us die?" Summer asked.

"That's the risk," Jonas said. "Dismissed."

Around sunset, Summer cornered Roman outside of Arcadeland. Ruth and Derek had gone ahead to get dinner. She and Roman were supposed to catch up and eat with them, but Summer had failed to get him alone all afternoon and wasn't about to let the opportunity slip away. The Tanks looked to Roman for leadership, so she had to know where he stood regarding Jonas White.

"Roman, can we talk for a minute?" Summer asked.

"Can we do it over hamburgers?" he asked. "We're running out of time."

"Not really," she said. "It won't take long."

Roman leaned against the wall. "What's up?"

"How much do you trust Jonas White?" Summer asked bluntly.

Roman seemed at a loss for a moment. "Enough, I guess. He's held true to everything he's told us."

"You realize the Subs and the Racers didn't just lose," she said. "They disappeared."

"I asked about that," Roman said. "They're on special assignments. Prep work for those of us still in the game."

"Do you believe that?"

"Don't you?"

Summer realized that she was on dangerous ground. If she seemed too rebellious, and he doubted her loyalty, Roman might report her to Jonas. She could get left behind on the upcoming mission, unable to help anyone.

"I'm just worried," she said. "The Graywaters seemed sincere to me. I'm afraid that Jonas getting Uweya may not be a good thing."

"It's just some old treasure," Roman said.

"You know that isn't true," Summer countered. "You know magic is real. The things guarding Uweya are magical. Whatever Uweya is, it's powerful, and I'm not sure Jonas White has given us any reason to believe he's a very good person."

"You think he's the bad guy?" Roman said. "You think we're the evil henchmen?"

"I think we could accidentally end up helping the bad guys if we're not careful," Summer said. "Did you feel like one of the good guys back at the trailer park?"

"How do you know the Graywaters were so good?" Roman said. "What if

Uweya could do a lot of good but they're keeping it hidden?"

"Well, I know they didn't send anybody to break down our doors and steal our stuff. And they didn't try to hurt us when they could have. They didn't make creepy statues that can control us, or send kids on life-threatening missions."

"Do you want out?" Roman asked with some heat in his tone. "Is that what this is about? Nobody is making you go, Summer. The three of us will be just fine."

"It isn't that," Summer said. "I'm just not sure we should deliver Uweya to Jonas."

"You think we should keep it?"

"Maybe nobody should have it," Summer said.

"Look," Roman said, "we wouldn't even know about Uweya if it weren't for Mr. White. If we don't get it for him, somebody else will. Which means somebody else will be Tank Racers, or maybe flying Tank Racers, and we'll be back to normal. I agreed to this treasure hunt, and I'm going to fulfill my agreement. Whatever else I think about Mr. White, one thing seems certain to me—he's not the kind of guy you double-cross."

"I guess you're right," Summer said, feeling nothing of the sort. "I'd hate to lose my stamps."

"I'm sure this will be intense," Roman said, "but what can happen to us? We're super fast and almost impossible to hurt. If we work together, we'll be fine."

"I hope so," Summer said. "Thanks for talking me through it. Part of my problem is that I'm nervous."

"No sweat, I get it. Should we grab those burgers before it gets too late?"

"Sure."

Summer had talked to Nate earlier. He felt confident that Chris and Risa were beginning to distrust Jonas. Plus he had a sure ally in Lindy. As she walked toward dinner with Roman, Summer determined that whatever else happened tonight, she needed to make sure the Tanks didn't win.

Nate flew beside Lindy above SR-24, gaining altitude over the hills where the freeway disappeared into the Caldecott Tunnel. He could hardly believe they were about to plunge into the San Francisco Bay in search of hidden treasure. He wondered if the Tanks were behind them on the road, heading toward Yerba Buena Island, or if they had some other strategy.

The Jets had consulted the map and decided that if the chest was too heavy to fly far, they would transport it to Angel Island. The Tanks had a driver, but getting to the island would surely prove problematic. Of course, if the chest was

light enough, they would simply fly it an absurd distance into the wilderness.

Having studied the map, the Jets had no trouble following SR-24 until it met up with I-580, and then continuing to I-80 and the Bay Bridge. The Jets flew high over the water, staying well away from the bridge. Dressed in dark clothes, gliding far from any lights, Nate felt invisible. From his lofty vantage above the bay, the gleaming spires of the San Francisco skyline looked beautiful. A cool breeze filled his nostrils with the humid smell of the sea.

Some distance from Yerba Buena Island, the Jets joined together in a hovering huddle. Risa held a large bowl, and Chris put the guidestone inside. They watched the stone marble roll to a certain side of the bowl, then moved off in that direction. After they had checked several more times, the guidestone finally settled squarely in the bottom of the bowl.

“We should be right over it,” Chris said.

“It feels like the stone is tugging downward,” Risa said.

Nate looked down at the black water of the bay. “I guess we’ll get a better sense of things once we’re underwater.”

“Too bad Jonas didn’t have waterproof night vision gear,” Risa said.

“We can perceive everything just fine underwater,” Chris said.

“Right, I meant for after we come up,” Risa explained.

“We have Lindy,” Nate said. “She’ll be enough.”

“I see it,” Lindy reported. “The top is barely poking above the floor of the bay.”

“You see the lighthouse?” Chris asked dubiously.

“Remember how she tracked the Hermit?” Nate asked. “Just trust her. She sees really well. Even through water in the dark.”

“Down we go,” Chris muttered.

They flew down and plunged into the water. Suddenly Nate had a precise sense of the floor of the bay and the sea life swimming around him. So far, he had sampled his Sub abilities only in the training facility pool. The capacity to perceive the surrounding environment in open water was a totally different experience. The vivid sensory input was almost too much to process.

Gliding down through the water felt different from flying through the air. The basics remained the same, but everything was slowed down. Not only was his top speed reduced, but it was tougher to accelerate. At least he could make tighter turns.

The temperature seemed perfect. Breathing the water felt no different from breathing air. His eyes saw less, but his perception of his surroundings remained effortlessly detailed.

The water here was neither terribly shallow nor shockingly deep. The bay

floor was dozens of feet down, but not nearly a hundred. As Lindy had described, the top of the stone lighthouse protruded from the silt.

“It’s big,” Nate said, his voice carrying clearly through the water.

“Huge,” Lindy said. “This is just the tip.”

“It seems more like the roof of a building than the top of a tower,” Chris said. “It’s too big around.”

“It’s a tower,” Lindy assured them. “It goes a long way down.”

“Really?” Risa said. “You can see through sand?”

“Pretty much,” Lindy replied.

“How do we get in?” Nate asked.

“We dig,” Lindy said. “There are openings into the tower not far below.”

“The guidestone is pulling me,” Risa said. “I think the attraction is increasing as we get closer.”

“Can you feel those sharks?” Chris asked.

“Yeah,” Nate said. Several prowled the water near the edge of his perception, the largest around six or seven feet long. “They don’t seem interested in us.”

“If they come this way, I’m out of here,” Risa said emphatically. “I won’t mess with sharks. Not for any reason. I’ll fly home and go to bed. I’m serious.”

“Where do we dig?” Chris asked as they neared the exposed portion of the tower.

“This side,” Lindy said, pointing. “It’ll get us to an opening fastest.”

Nate plunged his hands into the silt and began scooping it away. The others worked alongside him, sending up clouds of fine particles. At first their progress was hard to measure, but as they kept working, a definite hole began to form. As they burrowed deeper, a large quantity of sand collapsed inward through a gaping window.

“I guess we loosened it up,” Nate said.

“Whoa,” Chris said. “I can feel it now. The inside of the tower.”

Nate instantly recognized that Chris was right. Now that the barrier of sand had been removed, Nate could sense the water extending down to the base of the tower. He could feel the stone stairs winding down the enormous tube.

“It’s solid stone,” Nate realized.

“Yeah,” Chris agreed. “I don’t feel blocks. No bricks or anything. No mortar. It’s one big hollow rock.”

“I don’t want the guidestone anymore,” Risa said. “It’s tugging too hard. I don’t trust it.”

“I’ll take it,” Nate offered.

Risa handed it over. He noticed the pull immediately. Until this moment,

Nate had never felt anything unusual while holding the stone. Now the tug was unmistakable.

“After you,” Chris said.

Nate drifted into the lighthouse. “I don’t sense anything alive,” Nate said. “There’s nothing moving,”

Chris agreed. “Stay ready for traps.”

“Can you feel how the tower widens out down at the bottom?” Lindy asked. “Like it finally reaches a really large room.”

“I feel it,” Risa confirmed. “Really big. Lots of space.”

“But no giant squids,” Nate said. “No sea serpents.”

“I don’t feel anything like that,” Lindy said.

Nate started gliding down the stairs at a gentle pace. They had a long way to go, but he didn’t want to hurry too much and blunder into a trap.

“This is perfect darkness,” Chris said. “It makes no difference whether my eyes are open or shut. I’ve never seen anything to match it.”

“I almost can’t appreciate it,” Nate said. “I can tell that my eyes see only blackness, but I sense everything even better than when I have full sight. That sense almost becomes sight in my head, even though I see nothing.”

“Not for me,” Chris said. “I can feel everything, but it’s way different from sight. It’s more like touch. It’s like my nerves extend into the water. I feel whatever the water feels.”

“I can feel and see,” Lindy remarked.

“No surprise there,” Risa said. “You see better than Superman. Should we speed it up? The Tanks will be after us.”

“We don’t want to hit traps,” Chris cautioned.

“What traps are we going to hit?” Risa argued. “We’re not touching the floor or the walls. We’d feel tripwires coming long before we reached them.”

“She has a point,” Nate conceded. “I’ll hurry more.”

As they wound deeper into the lighthouse, the guidestone pulled harder than ever, not with overpowering force, but certainly insistent. Nate suspected that if he let it go, the stone would zoom directly to the Protector.

“Finding the Protector should be easy,” Nate commented. “The stone will haul us straight there.”

“I hope so,” Chris said. “I don’t want to stay here long. This would be a lonely place to die.”

“Shut up, Chris,” Risa said.

“Our bodies would be lost forever,” he said.

“I’ll leave,” Risa warned. “Don’t mess with me like that.”

“The one who freaks out and leaves is usually the first to get taken,” Chris

assured her.

“Don’t let him scare you,” Nate said. “This is more cool than scary. Think how ancient this lighthouse must be. We’re probably the first people to come here in thousands of years.”

“It’ll be cooler once it’s a memory,” Lindy said quietly.

They continued deeper. When the space widened out, it did so dramatically. The lighthouse must have had a huge building at the base. Nate could feel multiple large rooms. Trying to find the Protector would have felt really daunting had the guidestone not kept tugging him in an obvious direction. Soon it was dragging him along with enough force that he questioned whether he could bring himself to a standstill.

“You keep going faster,” Chris noted.

“It’s the guidestone,” Nate explained.

“I think I feel the chest,” Risa said. “Farther ahead on the path we’re on.”

“You’re right,” Nate realized. “We’re almost there.”

“I see it,” Lindy said. “It’s pretty. I can’t see inside of it.”

Nate felt the chest coming closer. It rested alone on a platform. As the stone pulled harder, Nate began to worry that his hand would get crushed if he kept hold of it. Just before he reached the chest, Nate let go of the stone. The guidestone thumped softly against the chest.

“It changed shape,” Lindy said.

Nate could sense the transformation. He reached out and grabbed the new incarnation of the guidestone. It no longer seemed drawn to the chest. It had grown somewhat. “It turned into a tiny replica of the chest,” Nate said.

“The chest is pretty big,” Chris observed.

“What’s it made of?” Lindy asked.

“Wood, maybe?” Nate said. “Worn really smooth? With jewels in it?”

“Is it clay?” Chris wondered. “Some type of ceramic?”

“It’s definitely smooth,” Risa said. “I don’t feel any cracks. It’s shaped like a chest, but I can’t tell where it opens.”

“No hinges,” Lindy agreed. “No keyhole. Not the tiniest crack. It’s like it has no lid.”

“The little replica has a lid,” Nate said. “I can feel the lid.”

“Right,” Chris agreed. “Me too. It seems obvious on the guidestone.”

Nate tried to open the replica. The lid wouldn’t budge. “It’s locked.”

“Mr. White didn’t think we could open it underwater,” Chris reminded him. “We can give it a better try when we get it out of here. Should we see if we can move it?”

“Lindy?” Nate said. “Would you hold the replica?”

“Sure,” she said, accepting the transformed guidestone.

Chris went to one side of the chest, Nate to the other.

“Moving the chest could set off a trap,” Nate said.

“True,” Chris acknowledged. “Everybody get ready for trouble.”

“Go for it?” Nate asked.

“Why not?”

They lifted together. Nate found the chest a bit lighter than he expected. It had a fair amount of weight to it and was pretty bulky, but overall it felt manageable. Nothing indicated that lifting it had triggered any sort of trap.

“How is it?” Risa asked.

“Could be worse,” Chris said. “Let’s get out of here.”

Advancing through the water, Nate and Chris carried the trunk back to the tower and started gliding up the stairs. Risa and Lindy followed.

Taking the chest up the tall tower didn’t particularly fatigue Nate. Once they got some momentum going, the effort almost felt more mental than physical. They just kept toting the chest upward, keeping away from the stairs, walls, and ceiling.

At last they emerged from the lighthouse and brought the chest up to the surface of the bay. The air felt empty and dark after the vivid sensations available underwater.

Lindy and Risa surfaced nearby.

“So far, so good,” Lindy said.

“Should we try to fly with it?” Chris asked.

“Sure,” Nate said.

With the chest between them, Nate and Chris ascended out of the water. They hadn’t risen more than ten feet before Nate’s arms were trembling with exertion. The boys stopped rising, and Chris’s side of the chest dipped. Nate lost his grip, as did Chris, and the chest splashed down into the water.

Nate dove down and stopped the chest from sinking clear to the bottom. Chris took hold of the other side. The girls gathered near.

“It’s too heavy to go far,” Nate said.

“It isn’t bad underwater,” Chris noted. “We could take it through the water to Angel Island. Then we would just have to fly it a little ways to a quiet spot.”

“Alcatraz is closer,” Lindy said, “but Jonas nixed that as a destination, along with Treasure Island and Yerba Buena.”

“He left Angel Island as fair game,” Chris said. “The Tanks will have a tough time getting there. Let’s go see if we can open this thing.”

The Chest



Working together, with one of them at each corner, Nate, Chris, Lindy, and Risa managed to fly the chest a few hundred yards inland from the Angel Island shore, crossing a small road and struggling some distance up a brushy slope. When they reached their limit and let the chest thump down, it struck the ground with finality.

Risa rubbed her hands briskly. “I lost circulation to my fingers.”

“That thing was heavy,” Chris said, stretching his arms. “This spot seems as remote as anywhere.”

Nate ran a hand over the top of the chest, then down the side. Unlike his body, the chest remained damp. “I still can’t feel how to open it. I can’t even tell whether it’s wood or ceramic or what.”

“I can sort of see it with the moonlight,” Chris said. “The color is darker than I realized. But I had a much better sense of it back in the water.”

“Let me get out the guidestone,” Lindy offered. She had stashed it in her backpack so she could help carry the chest. “Maybe it has a key inside.”

“The chest has no keyhole,” Risa pointed out.

“Well, maybe there’s something else in it,” Lindy said, rummaging. “It seems suspicious that the guidestone turned into a miniature chest. At least the little replica has a lid.”

Lindy produced the tiny chest and started prying at it with her fingers. “It’s stuck, but the lid has some wiggle to it. Wait, here we go.” She lifted the small lid, and simultaneously the top of the chest folded open as well. And then the chest kept unfolding in astonishing ways, as if lid after lid were opening in unpredictable directions. With a startled squeal, Lindy dropped the miniature chest as it transformed as well, mimicking the larger version.

“Whoa,” Nate breathed, taking involuntary steps back as the chest grew and evolved with each new lid that lifted. The unfolding process sped up. Strange

new shapes unfolded manically, expanding the chest to improbable proportions.

When the process ended, Nate found himself staring at the entrance to a stone building that extended back into the slope. The structure stood three times his height, with a triangular pediment supported by pillars. Because of how the building protruded from the slope, it looked as if it had been mostly buried in a landslide. A massive bronze door shielded the entrance.

“That was awesome,” Chris said.

“More like freaky,” Risa replied.

“I can’t see inside,” Lindy said. “Same as with the chest.”

Nate crouched, pointing at the ground. “Look, the guidestone matches the chest’s new shape. It’s even partly buried.”

“What’s with the guidestone?” Chris asked.

“It must be some sort of simulacrum,” Nate said. “I think touching it to the chest activated it.”

“Opening the guidestone chest made the actual chest transform,” Lindy said.

“So what happens if we open the little door?” Risa worried. “Will it change again? Will it turn it into a spaceship?”

“Let’s try the actual door first,” Chris suggested. He walked to the entrance of the building and tugged on the bronze door. It didn’t budge. Planting himself firmly, he pulled hard but still got no result.

“It might take them some time, but the Tanks are coming,” Nate said. “We should probably try the little door.”

Lindy crouched and opened the door of the small building. The door to the large building opened in perfect synchronization. Nate was braced for something more, but nothing else happened.

Risa, Nate, and Lindy joined Chris at the entrance. Nate could see a long, shadowy hall with seamless stone walls. Light shimmered in the distance.

“Big chest,” Chris said, the words gently echoing down the corridor.

Nate snorted softly. “A building in a box. It’s kind of like the Hermit making a boat or a barn using some junk in his backpack. Weird magic.”

“Let’s go find the Protector,” Lindy said.

“She’s right,” Chris agreed. “We should hurry.” He bent down to grab the guidestone, only to find it solidly stuck in the ground. “It won’t budge,” he said.

“We’ll have to leave it,” Nate said.

“That means we can’t keep the Tanks out,” Chris said.

“Then, like you said, we should hurry.” Rising off the ground, Nate glided forward. The others followed his lead. The air was cool and still. Glancing back, Nate saw his fellow Jets hovering along the dark corridor, their feet dangling.

They looked like phantoms. From up ahead, Nate heard a distant, steady pounding, supplemented by whirring murmurs and rhythmic squeals.

“Hear that?” Risa asked.

“Sounds like a big machine,” Chris said.

“A machine?” Lindy questioned. “In here? This place looks prehistoric.”

Nate increased his pace.

“Be ready for traps,” Chris warned.

Nate slowed a little. He could no longer feel everything the way he had in the water. All it would take was him brushing up against a tripwire in the gloom to trigger some serious trouble.

Up ahead, the hallway elbowed left. Golden light reflected from beyond the turn. The pounding, swooshing, squeaking, whirring sounds grew louder. When Nate reached the corner he stopped, then looked back at the others. “I think I found the traps.”

The hall stretched ahead of him, a chaos of moving parts, the scene lit by lamps embedded in the walls. Razor-sharp pendulums whisked back and forth at high speeds. Deadly blades whipped out of slots in the walls, ceiling, and floor, disappearing only to return, some alternating their vicious swipes, others twirling like propellers. Sharp spears erupted out of deep sockets, thrusting and retracting at a disheartening pace. Toward the far end of the corridor, large pillars pistoned up and down, pounding the floor with implacable force. The other Jets joined Nate, staring down the lethal corridor in despair.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Chris muttered.

“It’ll be like flying through a blender,” Risa said.

“Like flying through fifty blenders,” Nate said, surveying the lethal obstacles. “It doesn’t matter that we can fly. There are as many traps up high as down low. If we don’t get shredded into pasta, we’ll get crushed into paste.”

“There must be a pattern to it,” Lindy said.

“There’s a pattern,” Chris agreed. “Look at any specific part of the corridor. That pillar just goes up and down, same every time. That spike pokes in and out, over and over. That huge blade swings side to side. But the pattern is designed not to let anything through. We might dodge the first few blades, but then what? It’s the length of a football field!”

“Afterward we’d have to come back,” Risa pointed out.

“Is there a path through it?” Nate asked. “Like if we start on the lower right, then fly along the upper left side, then in the center, that sort of thing?”

They considered the passage together. Light glinted off sharp points and slashing blades. Nate traced possible routes through the obstacle course.

“They covered everything,” Chris said. “High and low, left and right, down

the middle. The only hope would be to dodge and dodge and dodge perfectly for a really long time.”

“No way,” Risa said. “We’d have a better chance if we got flushed through a garbage disposal. Or caught under a lawn mower. Or sucked into a jet engine. Or—”

“We get it,” Lindy interrupted. “You’re not wrong. What do we do?”

“The Tanks would be suited for this,” Nate realized. “They can move super fast, and, even if they messed up, they might survive the damage.”

“Good for them,” Chris said bitterly. “How does that help us?”

“Somebody has to get the Protector,” Nate said. “If we go after it, we’ll find out what our insides look like.”

“You think we should let them have it?” Risa asked.

“I think we should let them *get* it,” Nate said. “Kind of like how they let us bring the chest up from the lighthouse. I’m not saying we should let them keep it.”

Chris shook his head. “They’re too strong and fast. Once they have it, we’ll never get it back.”

“Our whole strategy is built around never letting them catch up,” Lindy said.

“That was before we knew we’d have to go through a meat grinder,” Nate said. “Killing ourselves isn’t an option. Look at that hallway! We’d be lunch meat in seconds! But that doesn’t mean we have to give up. On land, we’d never get the Protector from the Tanks. Our advantage is in the air and in the water. We’re on an island. We’ll have a chance when they leave.”

“They might be in a boat,” Chris said.

“Then we sabotage it,” Nate said. “We sink it.”

“They’d still be strong and fast in the water,” Risa said.

“But they’ll need to breathe,” Nate said. He paused, aware that they were trying to recover the final object Jonas White would need to claim Uweya. Obviously they needed to beat the Tanks. But if they succeeded, what then? The time had come to find out whether Chris and Risa would assist with his real mission. “We need to talk about something.”

“What?” Chris said.

“Jonas White is a bad guy,” Nate said.

“Well,” Chris replied uncomfortably, “he’s kind of scary.”

“Not just scary,” Nate said. “Not just intimidating. Not just bossy. Evil. Jonas White is not the only magician in the world. Some are good, some are in between, and some are really bad. I fought a magician who was trying to take over everybody in Colson. It was Mr. White’s sister.”

“Does that make him evil?” Risa asked.

“She used a treat called white fudge to tame everyone,” Nate said. “It was addictive and made them oblivious to her magic. With his nacho cheese, Jonas is using a similar trick to mess with our parents and many other people. There’s a magical police force that protects the world from evil magicians. Jonas White captured their leader along with one of their best detectives and is holding them prisoner. I’m here undercover. I’ve been investigating the arcade to help them. Same with some of my friends.”

“It’s all true,” Lindy said. “I know about it too. To make matters worse, Jonas White is also making the kids from the losing clubs disappear. His people may tell us they gave them special assignments, but what are nonmagical kids going to do? And why would the kids completely vanish?”

“What do you want us to do?” Chris asked.

“We need to stop Jonas from getting Uweya,” Nate said. “He’s a bad guy, and it’s really powerful. If he succeeds, it won’t just be bad for us. It’ll be bad for the whole area. Maybe even the whole world.”

“Mr. White has those simulacra of us,” Risa said. “How could we fight him?”

“We’ll have to worry about that later,” Nate said. “First I need to know whether I can count on you. I haven’t told you guys much about this yet because I couldn’t risk you warning Mr. White. But I can’t be careful anymore. We’re running out of time. The powers Jonas White gave us are fun, but once he has what he wants, he’ll get rid of us. He’s not our friend.”

“I believe you, Nate,” Chris said. “It makes a lot of things make sense. Is Lindy a magician too? Is that why she sees so well?”

Lindy shook her head. “I have a fake eye. The magician who Jonas captured gave it to me. It sees better than a normal eye.”

“Risa?” Nate asked.

“I’ll help,” she said. “I was stressed he might be evil ever since I saw my wax twin.”

“We have to get the Protector from the Tanks,” Nate said. “Summer is on our side, but she doesn’t think she can get the other Tanks to turn against Mr. White. Which means if we want to stop him, we first need to beat the Tanks.”

“Do you have a plan?” Chris asked.

“I think so,” Nate said. “It depends on what supplies we can find in time.”

He started flying back toward the entrance of the magical structure. The others followed. They emerged onto the slope of Angel Island, with a prime view of the San Francisco skyline.

“Oh, no,” Lindy said in a loud whisper. “We need to hide. The Tanks are on

the island, coming straight toward us. They're almost here!"

"This way!" Roman said excitedly, his eyes on the little compass that pointed toward Nate's bracelet. "We have to catch up before they get it!"

Summer glanced at her compass, which was attuned to Lindy. As they ran along the slope, the needle swiveled more than ever, forcing more frequent course corrections, which meant they had to be close. She worried that Nate hadn't had enough time to get the Protector. Roman had made an educated guess, and it was about to pay off.

While studying the map before the challenge began, Roman had pointed out Angel Island almost immediately. "They know we're in a car. They like the water and we don't. It's not far from Yerba Buena Island. Jonas left it as an option. If I were them, and the chest was heavy, I'd go there."

"And if the chest isn't heavy?" Derek had challenged.

"We lose," Roman said. "They'll fly it someplace really far. We'll still try to track them down, but I bet we won't make it."

And so when the competition had started, Roman had directed the driver to head straight to Tiburon. The town of Tiburon occupied a peninsula that ended less than a mile from Angel Island. The Tanks had crossed the Bay Bridge, then passed over the Golden Gate Bridge, continuing until they reached Tiburon and drove to the end of the peninsula.

At the tip of the peninsula, their compasses had pointed toward Angel Island. Derek had talked about stealing a boat, but Roman had insisted they couldn't risk the attention. Instead they swam across the gap to Angel Island. As Tanks, they were heavier than normal, but between her increased speed and her enhanced strength, Summer had found that she could swim a little better than usual. The others had felt the same way. Even so, the crossing had been scary in the dark. But they had made it, and now, clothes dripping, they were closing in on the Jets.

"Whoa," Ruth said. "They're moving."

"My compass is going nuts too," Derek said.

"My needle is turning too quickly," Roman said. "They must be nearby, in the air." He frantically looked skyward.

Summer looked up as well. She saw no flying kids in the moonlight. They would probably be hard to see unless they crossed directly in front of the moon. "Do they have the Protector?" she asked.

"If they do, we lost," Roman growled, increasing to maximum speed.

Summer and the other Tanks sped up to stay with him. Being a Tank gave Summer extra strength and endurance, but she still felt the draining effects of

running at top speed. She did not expect she could keep it up for more than a minute or two without getting totally wiped out.

Roman had stopped, and she came to a standstill beside him. He was facing a strange stone building that protruded from the slope. A miniature replica of the building jutted from the slope in front of the open bronze door. They shifted down to race mode.

“Looks like they came and went,” said Summer, feeling huge relief at the thought that the Jets might be under way with the Protector in their care.

Roman looked down at his compass. “They didn’t fly toward Arcadeland. At least not Nate. He went back toward Tiburon.”

“Risa too,” Ruth said.

“And Chris,” Derek chimed in. “Maybe we scared them off. Maybe they’re running.”

“The Racers tried the same thing,” Roman said. “Once they saw us coming, they let us do the hard part, then tried to steal the prize. Let’s hope the Jets are equally stupid. Come on.”

Roman led the way into the long hallway. Summer could see light glimmering toward the end of the passage.

“What is this place doing here?” Derek wondered.

“It must have something to do with the chest,” Roman said. “Maybe the chest led them here. This building sure doesn’t seem to belong.”

“Hear that?” Summer asked.

“Are those drums?” Roman wondered.

“Not just drums,” Derek said. “Listen.”

“Let’s check it out,” Roman said.

They charged down the hall at top speed. By the time they reached the corner, Summer was breathing hard. Shifting down to race mode, she stared in amazement at the assortment of whirling blades, stabbing spikes, and pounding pillars.

“Could they have flown through this?” Derek wondered.

Roman glared at the deadly obstacles for a moment. “No way. Even at top speed, we’ll have a tough time. If they had tried, they’d be splattered all over the walls.”

“I think you’re right,” Summer said, trying to hide her disappointment. Even with everything three or four times slower than usual, some of the blades were moving quite fast. She couldn’t see a route she would take to fly through the sharp-edged maze. Nate almost certainly didn’t have the Protector. She would have to find a way to deliver it.

“Then we just need to claim our prize,” Roman said.

“Might not be easy,” Ruth remarked.

Roman grunted his agreement. “No point in all of us risking it. Should we draw straws?”

“I’ll do it,” Summer said. If she had possession of the Protector, she might find a chance to get it to Nate.

“Really,” Roman said, impressed. “You’re volunteering?”

Summer shrugged. “I’ve always liked a challenge. I’m a Tank. At worst I’ll get pushed around a little.”

Roman eyed the frenetic corridor. “I don’t know, Summer. I wouldn’t want to test myself against those mashers down at the end.”

“Or some of those blades,” Derek added. “They look sharp and they’re swinging hard.”

“I wouldn’t ride through there in an actual tank,” Ruth said.

“I get it,” Summer said. “I’m not thrilled about the risk. But we need the Protector. At top speed I bet I can dodge everything.”

“Okay,” Roman said. “Be careful.”

“Give me a second to recover,” Summer said. “We shouldn’t have run here so quickly.”

“Take your time,” Roman said. “Ruth, go watch the entrance. Make sure the Jets don’t try to sneak up on us.”

“Sure,” Ruth said. Summer watched her walk away, her shoulders hunched. Ruth rarely spoke much. She always followed whatever Roman told her.

“I’ll come help out if you get into trouble,” Roman said, patting Summer’s arm.

“We’ll be watching your back,” Derek pledged.

Summer stared down the deadly corridor. She felt like she had most of her energy back. When she switched into her fastest mode, the frenzy of blades and spears slowed. Nothing was terribly fast now, and many things were comically slow. Some stretches of the corridor still appeared dangerous, but now it seemed survivable.

She started forward. At first she advanced diagonally, zigzagging down the corridor, navigating from one side to the other while stepping over blades and dodging razor pendulums. Then she reached a portion of the hall riddled with holes. Spears thrust from the walls, ceiling, and floors fast enough to make her dance forward in a precarious rush. Twisting, sliding, and leaping, she narrowly avoided sharp points as they came up from below, down from above, and sideways from all heights.

The next stretch of the obstacle course became a mix of everything. Slow pendulum blades got in the way as other blades scythed out from the walls and

floors. Jack-in-the-box spikes continued to poke at her in unpredictable rhythms. Axes swung back and forth menacingly.

At their seemingly reduced speed, any one of the obstacles would have been avoidable, but together they made Summer duck, jump, dodge, and contort as never before. The result felt like a wild game of hopscotch and dodge ball all at once. Breathing hard, Summer relied on instinct and reflex. She felt out of control as she spun, rolled, and lunged. Her progress slowed as the increasing onslaught of obstacles forced her to skip backward or focus on lateral movements rather than advance.

A blade nicked her shoulder, slicing her sleeve but not her skin. A spear grazed her leg, tearing her jeans. Staying at top speed was making her weary. After jumping a curved blade, she fell to one knee, and a spear poked her square in the shoulder, jolting her sideways into a sweeping blade that flung her forward.

Summer ended up on her hands and knees. Before she could recover, a spike from the wall hit her in the side of the head, rolling her onto her back. None of the blows had broken skin, but they felt like hard punches, and they left her unbalanced.

Summer could feel exhaustion setting in. She worried that if she remained at top speed, she might pass out. Rising to her feet, Summer shifted down into race mode.

Everything sped up around her. The formerly slow pendulums became a threat, and everything else became too quick to process. Summer skipped forward a couple of steps before she started getting hit from what seemed like all directions at once. Her body flopped around the corridor. It was like being caught in a stampede. There was no dodging anymore. She just closed her eyes and tucked her head as her body was mercilessly hammered. She was heaved forward and backward until she lost all sense of which direction was which.

Finally she came to a rest, flat on her back. Blades whirled above her. Spears protruded and retracted near her. But nothing was currently striking her.

Summer downshifted out of race mode, and everything sped up even more. Still nothing hit her. She had found a safe little pocket in the midst of all the chaos.

“Are you all right?” Roman called, his voice faint due to the surrounding commotion. “Want us to come after you?”

“I’m okay,” Summer managed. She was over halfway through the inhospitable hallway. She wasn’t bleeding. She felt pummeled and dizzy, but she didn’t think anything was broken. “I found a quiet place. I need to rest for a minute.”

Slowly her breathing returned to normal. Her clothes were tattered—her jeans had lost most of one leg, and both of her sleeves hung in shredded ribbons. At least her body was holding up.

Pressing her cheek to the floor, Summer closed her eyes. She needed to let herself fully recover from running at top speed or she would end up getting battered again. There was no big hurry. In fact, the delay was probably just what Nate needed. It would give him time to strategize how to steal the Protector from the Tanks.

Mostly unaware of the passing time, Summer paid attention to how her body was feeling. The dizziness passed. Her heart rate lowered. Her breathing slowed. Still she waited.

“Are you awake?” Derek asked. It was hard to hear him over the pounding pillars and noisy devices all around.

“If we hadn’t run so much at top speed for no reason, I wouldn’t need a break,” Summer replied.

“We’re just making sure you’re all right,” Roman said. She didn’t think that was completely true. They were getting impatient.

“You’re welcome to go get it,” Summer said. “I can just come back.”

“You’re doing great,” Roman said.

“Did it hurt?” Derek called.

“It was like getting punched and tackled a lot,” Summer said. “I felt it, but I didn’t get cut or break any bones. I’m not even very sore anymore.”

“You were really getting thrown around,” Roman said.

“I could tell,” Summer replied. “I’m almost ready to try again.”

She took deep breaths, trying to gauge how rested she felt. It seemed like she was mostly recovered. She was almost two-thirds of the way down the corridor. She figured she had enough energy to at least make it to the end.

Summer shifted into race mode. Everything slowed. She shifted up to her fastest state, and everything slowed again.

She rolled forward, then rose to her knees. After leaning back to avoid a spear, she regained her feet and dashed forward. Once again she skipped, hopped, ducked, and dodged her way onward, feeling slightly calmer with the knowledge that even if she got hit, she should survive the beating.

Up ahead, a brutal series of pillars pummeled the ground. Even at her top speed, they moved pretty fast. Each struck with tremendous force. Summer did not want to test her Tank stamp against a direct hit. The relentless pillars looked strong enough to squash anything into a pancake.

As Summer twisted, shuffled, and jumped, the mashing pillars drew closer. Four pillars wide and twenty pillars deep, the crushing section of the corridor

never held still. It was hard to identify a pattern in the constant motion.

A blow that clipped her shoulder made Summer stagger when she reached the pillars. A heavy column of stone slammed down beside her. As it lifted up, she stepped underneath it, barely avoiding a pillar that boomed down onto her previous position.

Keeping her eyes up, Summer zigzagged forward, columns thundering down to the left and right, ahead and behind. Toward the end she dove, rolling out onto the stone floor beyond the reach of the pitiless columns.

No obstacles remained ahead of her. At the end of the corridor, a small statue awaited in an alcove. The floor vibrated each time a column crashed down behind her. She had survived. She returned to regular race mode.

Summer thought she could hear Roman or Derek yelling at her, but with the pounding pillars so close, she couldn't make out any words. Standing, she took a moment to examine the punctures and tears in her ragged clothing. Then she walked to the end of the hall.

In the alcove stood a statue of a shirtless warrior, less than a foot tall. Squat and broad, he had thick limbs, large feet, and a cartoonishly oversized head. His eyes lacked irises or pupils; his nose was broad, his ears small. He was slightly crouched, his legs together, and he held a club in each fist.

Summer looked around. The corridor ended here. "You must be the Protector," she said.

The statue offered no response. Behind her, the pillars continued to batter the floor.

She found the statue quite light. Of course, with the tank stamp, she was considerably stronger than usual, making it tricky to guess how much the statue might normally weigh.

Turning, she faced the booming columns. The thought of running back through the frantic gauntlet was disheartening. She would need to rest again before attempting the return trip.

As she watched the columns piston up and down, Summer realized how difficult it was to see Roman and Derek at the far end of the hall beyond all of those moving obstacles. Which meant they couldn't see her.

Summer looked down at the Protector. If she broke it, wouldn't that mess up Jonas White's plans? He needed it to access Uweya. She could pretend it had happened by accident.

With her stamp-enhanced strength, Summer flung the Protector to the floor. Nothing broke off. Upon closer examination, she failed to find a chip or a crack. She threw it down again. She bashed it against the wall. She threw it head first, then feet first. She hurled it end over end across the width of the corridor. None

of the punishment even scratched it.

Summer supposed she should have known it wouldn't be so simple. If the Protector were easily destructible, somebody probably would have broken it long ago.

Then she considered the pillars. If anything could destroy the little statue, it would be them.

She carried the statue to the nearest row of pounding columns. As she neared, the columns stopped ramming the ground. She continued forward, and the next row of pillars stopped functioning as well.

It was good news and bad news. She couldn't use the obstacles in the corridor to destroy the statue, but apparently the Protector was her free ticket out. The trend continued as she progressed along the hallway. When she passed beyond the pillars, the spears stopped stabbing, the blades quit whirring, and the pendulums halted. In no time she made it back to Derek and Roman.

"Nice work, Summer," Derek said, giving her a high five.

"Looks like you rescued your clothes from a pack of wild dogs," Roman joked.

"I'm starting a new trend," Summer declared. "Wet and mangled."

"Can I see the Protector?" Roman asked, holding out his hand.

Summer could think of no good reason to deny him, so she handed it over.

"It's light," he said, hefting it. "Small. We need to be ready for the Jets to try to swipe it. You've got to be tired, so I'll keep hold of it for now."

Once again, Summer could think of no plausible reason to disagree. She nodded woodenly.

Derek and Roman trotted ahead of her. She had to help Nate. When would he strike? In the water, if he had any sense. But he needed to be careful. She knew how ruthless Roman and the other Tanks could be. If they got hold of anybody, they would force Nate to back off with threats of violence.

Roman stepped warily out into the night. As he passed through the entrance, the stone building began to shudder. Summer raced out the doorway as the hallway behind her

began to collapse. As she watched in surprise, the stone building folded in on itself, promptly shrinking down to nothing. The miniature replica of the building did likewise. The hillside where the building had stood looked churned up, as if an excavation had caved in. Otherwise there was no indication the building had ever existed.

Roman studied the sky. "We have to be ready for an attack at any moment. When they come for us, grab them. If we show them we're in charge, they'll back off."

“Should we go straight across to the mainland?” Derek asked. “Or should we loop around wide, maybe avoid them.”

“Subs can sense things in the water,” Summer said, wanting to appear helpful. “They’ll probably sense us wherever we go. Our best bet is to get across as fast as possible.”

“Good thinking,” Roman said. “I’ll keep hold of the statue. You guys make a triangle around me.”

They ran to the side of the island facing Tiburon without encountering any of the Jets. They dove into the water and started swimming. Summer kept her arms and legs thrashing, hoping the exertion would help her get over the shock of the cold water.

“Don’t go top speed unless we get attacked,” Roman huffed. He seemed to be having trouble keeping afloat with the statue cradled in one arm.

“You all right?” Summer asked.

“Isn’t easy,” Roman replied. “We’re stronger, and we’re moving faster than normal. But we’re also heavier. I feel the Protector’s weight more in the water. I’ll make it. Don’t worry about me. You guys keep an eye out for the Jets.”

Nate floated motionlessly beside Lindy, Chris, and Risa as the Tanks swam away from Angel Island, arms and legs churning with inhuman speed. He couldn’t see them with his eyes, but he could sense every stroke. Roman was barely keeping his head above water, flailing along with a small statue in the crook of one arm.

“We’ll wait until they’re out in the middle,” Nate said. “They won’t see us coming. Lindy and I will snag Roman.”

Nate held one end of a rope they had stolen from a boathouse. Lindy clutched the other end. Chris and Risa had a rope as well. When you could fly, it was easy to forage.

“If you miss him, we move in,” Risa confirmed.

“Right,” Nate said. “Lindy and I will use the rope to drag Roman down away from the others. Once he hands over the Protector, we’ll pull him back up.”

“He’s stubborn,” Chris warned. “And he’s still mad at us. He won’t give it up easily.”

“Stubborn or not,” Nate said, “when you don’t have air, nothing else matters.”

“You won’t let him get hurt,” Risa checked.

“No way,” Nate said. “The last thing I want to do is hurt anybody. I’m more worried about us. If those Tanks get hold of us, we could really get hurt. Especially if they’re panicked.”

“Like they will be if they’re drowning,” Chris said. “I don’t like this. Somebody is going to get thrashed.”

“I don’t like it either,” Nate said. “But we can’t let them have the Protector. It’s not an option. Somebody needs to mess up Mr. White’s plans. Unless we get the Protector, we’ll be in no position to do it. Let’s get ready.”

Nate and the others drifted along about fifteen feet below the Tanks. As they approached the midpoint between the island and the peninsula, Nate gave a signal to Lindy. The two of them rose up through the water, moving with the ease of flight, until they were almost within reach of the Tanks’ flailing limbs. Up close Nate had a better appreciation for how quickly they were moving.

Leaving Lindy on one side of Roman, Nate surged up out of the water, leaping over him and draping the wet rope across his back. They both swam down swiftly, allowing Roman no time to recover. By the time he twisted free, he was twenty feet below.

As Roman tried to stroke upward, Chris and Risa swept in with their rope stretched between them. The rope caught him around his midsection, and they dragged him almost to the bottom.

Moving in a frightening blur, Roman yanked on the rope with his free arm, trying to pull Chris closer. Chris and Risa released the rope and kept out of reach. Freed from the rope’s pull, Roman had clearly gone into overdrive. He swam upward with three limbs, making only modest progress considering how fast his arms and legs were moving.

Above, the other Tanks were diving down, but they obviously could see nothing, and their futile search stayed confined to the ten feet nearest the surface. Nate stayed aware of them but didn’t feel the need to worry.

Suddenly Roman was no longer moving in fast motion. Not at all. He shoved the statue aside and stroked pathetically for the surface. Nate sensed the abandoned statue sinking. At first Nate didn’t understand the hasty surrender. Roman had barely been underwater for ten seconds. Then the realization hit.

“Roman used his fastest mode,” Nate called, already swimming to help him. “Every second to us was like ten to him. That’s a long time without breathing. He’s drowning.”

When Nate and Lindy snared Roman with their rope, he clung to it. They surged for the surface, angling away from the other Tanks.

“Where is he?” Derek shouted in frustration.

“I don’t know,” Summer replied. “I can’t see anything.”

After Roman was sucked under, Derek and Ruth had shifted into top speed. Summer had followed suit in order to avoid looking suspicious.

“He’s been under a long time,” Ruth fretted.

They were no longer diving down. Summer supposed you could only dive to look at blackness a certain number of times before it began to feel useless. The Jets could have dragged Roman away in any direction. And Ruth was right—he had been under a long time.

“Are they trying to kill him?” Derek asked angrily. He squinted at his compass in frustration.

“No,” Summer realized. “It only seems like a long time to us. And if Roman is at top speed, it seems like a long time for him too. But the Jets might not know.”

“They could drown him by accident,” Ruth gasped.

“Let’s go back to race mode,” Summer said. Staying at top speed was starting to make her woozy.

Not long after she slipped out of her fastest state, Summer saw Nate and Lindy burst from the water twenty yards away. They left Roman behind, slowly gasping and flailing.

“Why is he moving so slowly?” Derek asked.

“He caught on,” Summer realized, switching back to her fastest state and stroking over to him. “He slowed down to conserve oxygen.”

Nate and Lindy were flying back toward the peninsula. Summer and the other Tanks reached Roman. They slowed back to race mode.

“Help him float,” Summer ordered. She slowed down to regular speed. “Just rest,” she told Roman. “We’ll hold you up.”

Between wheezing and coughing, Roman managed to speak. “I lost it. I lost the statue. I was drowning. They pulled me deep. It was heavy. I couldn’t swim up . . . fast enough.”

Chris and Risa burst out of the water ten yards away. They paused, hovering about ten yards in the air.

“You okay, Roman?” Chris called.

“Like you care,” Roman spat.

“If we didn’t care, we wouldn’t ask,” Risa shot back.

“Have you guys seen Nate and Lindy?” Chris wondered, looking around.

“We knocked them out,” Roman said. “Give us the statue . . . and we’ll tell you . . . where to find the bodies.”

“Nice try,” Chris said. “We know they flew up out of the water.”

“They went back toward Tiburon,” Summer said.

“Why that way?” Risa asked.

“Probably to help these guys,” Chris said. “Sorry about almost drowning you, Rome. It took us a bit to realize you were spending more time underwater

than it seemed thanks to your super speed.”

“You guys are geniuses,” Roman said darkly. “I don’t need comfort. Either give us the Protector or get out of here.”

“Suit yourself,” Chris said.

He and Risa flew away.

“I hate them,” Roman mumbled.

“It was nice of them to check on you,” Summer said.

“It’s easy to act nice after you’ve won,” Roman griped.

“You’re sounding better,” Summer pointed out.

“Failure must agree with me,” Roman replied. He struck the water with his fist. “I didn’t think about them using tools to drag us down. Nets, ropes—I should have been ready for that!”

“Here,” a voice called from above. It was Nate. He didn’t pause. He and Lindy swooped over the Tanks, each dropping a boogie board.

Derek and Ruth retrieved the flotation devices.

“This will make it easier,” Ruth said, giving hers to Roman.

“Or more pathetic,” Roman said. “I hope they crash into a helicopter.”

“You need to grow up,” Summer said. “And you better start acting nicer to them. Soon they’ll be flying Tanks.”

Rescue



Trevor tossed the last of his six darts at the target across the room. The dartboard had two sides—one consisted of a circular grid with numbers around the perimeter; the other displayed a simple target of concentric rings with a bull’s-eye at the center. The complicated side involved calculations to determine the score. This time Trevor had opted for the simple target.

His final dart missed the center circle by a finger width. Two of the previous darts had already hit the bull’s-eye. Only one had strayed beyond the second innermost ring. After all the recent practice, his aim was getting reliable.

Trevor had not left the room since coming for help from Mr. Stott. The sanctum had a small bathroom, and Mr. Stott brought him meals. He slept fine and ate well, but he often felt bored. Tonight, although it was getting late, he couldn’t settle down. The confinement was making him increasingly restless.

After a quick knock, the door to his room opened and Mr. Stott entered with the Battiato brothers. Victor and Ziggy nodded their greetings.

“What are you guys doing here?” Trevor asked happily. “I thought you steered away from lairs.”

“We generally do,” Victor agreed. “But any port in a storm. Jonas White has started actively targeting us. Some of his sideshow henchmen mixed it up with us earlier tonight. We had crossed paths with a few of them since our arrival, but it never came to blows. Any unspoken truce between us has officially expired. And now we have an opportunity that will leave one of us defenseless.”

“They got a message from Pigeon,” Mr. Stott said.

“His tracking button went dark after he disappeared,” Ziggy reported. “But tonight the signal returned long enough for us to pinpoint a location. He’s being held somewhere below Arcadeland.”

“The tracker had been dark too long for it to suddenly function without a

reason,” Victor said. “We assume he got help from a fellow prisoner.”

“Almost certainly Mozag,” Ziggy added.

“Unless Jonas White is being sly,” Mr. Stott murmured. “Could he be using Pigeon’s tracker to lure you into a trap?”

“Possibly,” Victor said. “But this late in the game, I don’t think we can afford to ignore the signal.”

“How do you get the signal?” Trevor asked.

Mr. Stott held up a stocking cap and a pair of mittens. “By wearing these. Mozag enchanted them.”

“A single mitten is enough,” Ziggy explained, “but wearing everything clarifies the signal.”

“With one mitten, we can feel the direction of the various trackers,” Victor said. “With both mittens, we can feel the distance. Add the stocking cap, and we can almost see the location.”

“Did Pigeon break the button?” Trevor wondered.

“I’m not sure,” Victor said. “The signal didn’t last long. The mittens vibrate a lot if the button gets broken. That didn’t happen, but interference from the magical barriers around Arcadeland could have blocked the effect.”

“What’s the plan?” Trevor asked. “Are you going in?”

“The Battiatos came straight here after pinpointing the signal,” Mr. Stott said. “Victor intends to go after Pigeon. Ziggy will rest here in his depleted state. But you might be able to accompany Victor.”

“Really?” Trevor asked.

“Let me see the back of your hand,” Mr. Stott said. Trevor extended his arm, and Mr. Stott took a close look at the stamp, probing the ink with his fingertips. “It’s as I suspected. The stamp recently became inactive. When were you last stamped?”

Trevor considered the question. “About three days ago. Does this mean I can use candy?”

Mr. Stott produced a small box. “Bestial Biscuits,” he said. “My latest invention. A blending of Brain Feed, Mrs. White’s notes on Creature Crackers, and my general interest in shape-shifting.”

“What do they do?” Trevor asked.

Mr. Stott shook a biscuit from the box. “I’ve wanted to attempt something like this for years. Mrs. White’s notes together with this emergency provided me with the means and the motivation. Ideally, I’d like to produce a broader variety at some point. For now, six variations will have to suffice.”

“Same question,” Trevor said. Sometimes Mr. Stott could get a little long-winded.

Mr. Stott held out the biscuit to Trevor. "What does this look like?"

"A bear," Trevor said.

"Correct," Mr. Stott replied. "If you eat it, you will transform into a Kodiak bear, the largest of the brown bears."

"Awesome," Trevor approved.

Mr. Stott placed the bear cracker back inside the box. "Your bond to the simulacrum Jonas White produced corresponds directly to your physical form. While you remain in an altered shape, your simulacrum should prove useless. The transformation will only last for about half an hour. When you revert to your actual shape, you will become vulnerable again."

"What other animals do you have?" Trevor asked.

"I've cooked up a mountain gorilla, a golden eagle, a great white shark, a Siberian tiger, a gray wolf, and the Kodiak bear. I made two of each. The effort stretched me to my limits. I want to retain one set for whoever loses the next competition."

"So I get to go with Victor?" Trevor verified.

"It won't be a picnic," Victor warned.

"I bet," Trevor said. "You guys don't usually go after magicians in their lairs."

"Not ideally," Victor said. "However, this lair is more vulnerable than some. By taking prisoners and holding them in his lair, Jonas White has reduced his claim on the space, weakening his entitlement to protective magic. The more prisoners he holds, the more fragile his barriers become. Parts of Arcadeland are open to the public, which further weakens the lair. Plus, a Simulcrist needs to leave certain barriers down in order for his simulacra to stay connected with their targets."

"Still, Jonas White is an old magician with plenty of skill," Ziggy said. "He has help from several engineered apprentices, and we can count on him to have a number of other tricks up his sleeve."

"That means Victor will need help," Trevor said. "I'm coming. I have to help my friends."

"They could use all the help they can get," Ziggy said. "We haven't confronted a threat like Jonas White in quite some time. The world is in big trouble."

"Your clothes will be absorbed into the animal you become," Mr. Stott explained. "Small items on your person as well. After you spend half an hour as a tiger, for example, you'll revert to your true form, fully dressed with all of your gear."

"Definitely beats having to streak across town looking for clothes," Trevor

said gratefully. “So I can keep extra crackers with me, and eat another as soon as I become human again?”

“That is exactly what I would suggest,” Mr. Stott approved. “The longer you spend in your human form, the more opportunity you’ll give Jonas to attack you with your simulacrum. Keep the Bestial Biscuits handy.”

“Are we ready to go?” Trevor asked.

“I believe so,” Mr. Stott said, looking to Victor.

Ziggy began to age, shrink, and droop. Victor swelled with new muscle, gaining several inches of stature. His face became more youthful and chiseled. His suit coat looked ready to burst. He rolled his head on his thick neck, producing snaps and pops.

“I’m ready now,” Victor said.

Ziggy sagged into a chair, wiping sweat from his brow.

“You all right?” Victor asked.

Ziggy nodded sluggishly. “I figured you could use all that I could spare. I’ll be fine. You’re the one heading into the thick of it.”

“You’ll probably want to start as an animal that can ride in a car,” Mr. Stott advised Trevor. “Victor can have a second biscuit ready for when you storm Arcadeland.”

“Will I still feel like myself?” Trevor asked.

“Losing yourself in your new form is an inherent risk of shape-shifting,” Mr. Stott said. “I’ve taken some measures to limit the risks. I modified the animals so that their senses will feel closer to what you’re used to experiencing. The minds of the animals will react as if under the influence of Brain Feed, which should allow your mental processes to remain unclouded. The limited time you’ll spend as each creature will also help you retain your self-possession.”

“Okay, let’s do it,” Trevor said. “I guess I’ll start as a wolf.”

Mr. Stott rummaged in the box. “Let me find the right biscuit.”

“Why call them biscuits?” Trevor wondered.

“Here in America, biscuits are fluffy,” Mr. Stott said. “In Britain, biscuits are like cookies or crackers.”

“Are you British?”

“Not particularly.” He held out a cracker to Trevor. “I guess I liked the alliteration—Bestial Biscuits.”

Trevor accepted the biscuit. “You want to give Victor the box?”

“I’ll give you the box,” Mr. Stott said. “It should disappear along with your clothes and remain with you. But let’s give Victor the biscuit you want to use inside Arcadeland. Eat it the moment you change out of your wolf form.”

“What should I use?” Trevor asked Victor.

“I’m no animal expert,” Victor said. “Gorilla, bear, or tiger all sound good.”

“I guess bear,” Trevor said. “It seems big and heavy and strong. A tiger seems better outside. A bear could bulldoze through those halls. Hopefully I’ll be able to help you knock down doors and intimidate the bad guys.”

“I like it,” Victor said, accepting the bear cracker from Mr. Stott. “Let’s get rolling.”

Trevor put the wolf biscuit in his mouth. It tasted like cinnamon shortbread, but it was a little too chalky for him to call it delicious. When he swallowed, his entire body burned and tingled. His arms and legs shortened as he fell forward. His nose and mouth elongated into a muzzle, his ears shifted higher up his head, a tail sprouted from his rear, and fur emerged all over his body.

By the time his front paws hit the ground, the rapid transformation felt complete. Trevor could feel new strength in his jaws. His eyesight seemed pretty much unchanged. He sensed a new spectrum of aromas rising from the carpet, as well as distinct odors coming from Mr. Stott and the Battiatos. Faint sounds that he hadn’t noticed before came to him clearly, like the news on the TV in the family room. Trevor stretched his back and lifted his paws. The new form felt surprisingly natural.

“Quick change,” Ziggy said.

“How do you feel?” Mr. Stott asked.

“Great,” Trevor said. “My hearing is sharper. I’m picking up new smells. I want to run.”

“I wouldn’t mind being in motion myself,” Victor said. “Follow me.”

Victor led the way out of the room, down from the apartment, and out the back of the candy shop. The pungent aromas coming from the display cases of sweets were almost too much for Trevor, but he liked how smoothly he could move on all fours.

Trevor paused after exiting the candy shop. What if Mr. Stott was wrong? What if Jonas White managed to attack Trevor with his simulacrum while he was in wolf form? Trevor supposed it was possible, but he had to take the risk.

Victor opened the passenger door to the van, and Trevor hopped inside, reflecting that without fingers it would have been almost impossible for him to work the handle. Victor came around and slid in behind the wheel, moving the seat back a little to accommodate his larger physique.

“Do we have a strategy?” Trevor asked.

“I considered ramming the van through the front doors,” Victor replied. “I decided that might be a little dramatic, plus we could needlessly injure ourselves. It’s nearly eleven. Arcadeland will be closed. We’ll go in on foot, probably

through a side door. I'm not sure how we'll access the basement. We'll have to improvise. Plan to storm in and play rough."

This late there was only modest traffic on the roads. With every moment that passed, Trevor gained confidence that Jonas couldn't harm him. He felt eager to be in motion and squirmed restively as they made their way to the arcade. At length, Victor eased to a stop a block from Arcadeland.

"Now we wait?" Trevor asked.

"We get out of the van," Victor said, opening his door. "Then we wait for you to return to normal and instantly make you a bear."

Victor closed his door and walked around the van. He opened Trevor's door and let him jump down. They walked to a quiet alleyway.

Trevor could smell a discarded ketchup packet, old gum, and dozens of subtler scents. He followed Victor into the dark alley, aware of how the pads on his feet felt against the asphalt.

"How much longer?" Trevor asked.

Victor checked his watch. "If it lasts half an hour, we need to wait at least ten more minutes."

"If I eat the bear biscuit now I guess we risk mixing magic," Trevor said.

"Right. We have to hold off. No telling what would happen otherwise."

"And I guess we shouldn't get much closer," Trevor said.

"Smarter to wait," Victor said. "I could scout ahead and open the door, but I might get discovered and ruin our surprise. We'll go together, a guy and his bear."

The conversation died. Victor seemed content to stand with his hands in his pockets. Trevor paced back and forth, sniffing at the more interesting scents.

When Trevor finally transformed, there was little warning. His body became hot and tingly—then he was on his hands and knees, fully clothed, the box of animal crackers in his hand.

Victor was immediately at his side, the bear biscuit in hand. Trevor chomped it down, hoping Jonas White wouldn't sense his availability in time to work any magical mischief.

Again heat rushed through him as his body fleshed out and expanded. His muscles ballooned, covered by layers of fat and shaggy fur. Rising up on his hind legs, Trevor looked down at Victor, surprised to stand so much taller than the burly investigator.

"That's more like it," Victor said. "Feeling good?"

Trevor dropped down to all fours. "I feel big." He padded forward, heavy muscles bulging across his back. His hearing had lost some of its edge, but if anything his sense of smell was keener. "Jonas White better watch out."

“Don’t get too cocky,” Victor said, walking beside him. “The guy is a magician. We’ll keep things quiet for as long as we can. When they come after us, don’t be shy about letting them have it. Tonight we’re playing for keeps. We have to find Mozag and get him out.”

“What about John?” Trevor asked. “What about Pigeon?”

“On our priority list, they rank a distant second,” Victor said. “I mean them no disrespect, but Pigeon and John probably can’t stop Jonas White. Mozag probably can. We need him to fix this mess and save the others.”

“Okay,” Trevor agreed. “But if we can save all three?”

“We save all three. Don’t get me wrong. John and Pigeon could help us fight our way out. I value them. I’d love to spring them as well. But we need to go in with our priorities straight. Once this gets started, I expect things will move quickly. We won’t have lots of time to ponder our options.”

“Got it,” Trevor said.

“This way,” Victor said, speeding up to a run.

Trevor increased his pace. He was not as light on his feet as before, but he could still move rapidly. He expected that at full speed he could easily outrace Victor.

They slowed as they reached Arcadeland. Producing a couple of tools, Victor went to work on a nondescript door. Trevor could hardly believe how quickly he opened it.

“Did you used to be a burglar?” Pigeon asked.

Victor shrugged. “You work as an investigator for almost a hundred years, you pick up a trick or two. Get in there.”

Trevor squeezed through the doorway, brushing the frame on both sides. The main lights were off, leaving the flickering displays of various games to illuminate the room. Trevor smelled no people, but some delicious fragrances beckoned him toward the snack bar.

“Stay with me,” Victor said, trotting past Trevor toward an EMPLOYEES ONLY door across the arcade. Upon arrival, Victor found the door locked, but he again used his tools to remedy the problem.

With the door open, they could hear an alarm blaring. “What did we do?”

“We’re both magically altered,” Victor said. “We probably tripped a warning system as soon as we entered. I bet Jonas didn’t want that kind of alarm heard in the public areas.”

“What now?” Trevor asked.

Victor withdrew a tranquilizer pistol. “We hurry.”

Trevor pressed through the doorway and followed Victor down an industrial hall lined with pipes and wires. His ursine body almost felt too large for the

relatively narrow passage.

“Any idea how to get down a level?” Victor asked.

“I’ve never been down there,” Trevor said. “Nate mentioned an elevator.”

Victor tried every door they passed. The first three were unlocked. He poked his head in, then proceeded down the hall. The fourth door was locked.

Tucking his pistol under his arm, Victor went to work with his tools. The door swung open and he leaned through the doorway. “Bingo.”

“Elevator?” Trevor asked.

“Stairs.”

Victor passed through the doorway. As Trevor started through, he paused, catching the distinct scent of a person other than Victor. The odor came from the far corner of the landing, where nobody was standing.

“There’s a guy in that corner,” Trevor said. “I can smell him.”

For a moment, the air in the corner shimmered, then Todd materialized, charging forward with an upraised baseball bat. Thanks to the warning from Trevor, Victor had already turned to confront the attacker. Stepping toward Todd, the beefy investigator caught the bat in his palm before the swing had reached full momentum. A measured blow from Victor’s elbow sent the smaller, thinner man skidding to the floor. Bending over, Victor seized Todd by the front of his shirt and dragged him to his feet. Todd’s eyes kept darting nervously at Trevor.

“You like my bear?” Victor asked, shaking him. “Bears are omnivorous. They’ll eat just about anything. Even malnourished little twits like you.”

“It sounds like a kid,” Todd said, failing to keep his composure.

“It bites like a steel trap,” Victor promised, still gripping Todd by the front of his shirt. “Who are you?”

“I just work here,” Todd said.

Victor lifted Todd upward so he had to stand on his tiptoes. With his free hand, Victor messed up Todd’s green faux hawk. “You just work here? What are you supposed to be? The invisible custodian who cleans the stairs with his baseball bat?”

“Not invisible,” Todd corrected. “Unnoticed. I’m good at blending if people haven’t seen me.”

“Then you sneak up behind them and knock them out,” Victor said. “You blew it, pal. I’ve seen you. And my sidekick can smell you. Take us to Mozag.”

“Who’s that?” Todd asked.

“He’s the reason you can still walk and talk. Are you sure you want to take away my one motive for keeping you functional?”

“I’ve heard of him,” Todd admitted.

“You feel fragile. I’ve always wanted to see my bear dance on a skinny

little guy like you.”

Trevor lumbered toward Todd and started sniffing him. Todd smelled strongly of beef jerky and potato chips. He tried to flinch away from Trevor, but Victor wouldn't let him. Trevor nuzzled him roughly.

“Don't waste one more second of my time, deadbeat,” Victor threatened. “Now or never.”

“I'll take you,” Todd said. “But you have to make it look like you're dragging me there, or no deal. You won't get Mozag out, no matter how many steroids you take, no matter how big a bear you use as backup. This is Jonas White's lair, man.”

Victor shifted his grip to Todd's upper arm. “Let's go. Double time.”

Trevor trailed Victor and Todd down multiple flights of stairs until they reached a door at the bottom. Victor opened the door and yanked Todd through. As Trevor followed, a blur from the side streaked across his line of sight, striking Victor on the side of his shoulder and sending him sprawling.

The attacker was a muscular man with spiky black hair. He turned to face Trevor defiantly.

“Watch out,” Victor warned. “He's a Combat Kinetic—a ComKin.”

This concrete hallway was wider and taller than the one upstairs. Trevor reared up on his hind legs, towering over the man. Sneering, the ComKin jumped forward, kicking both legs into Trevor's furry chest with sudden ferocity. The blow landed before Trevor could react. It felt like he had been hit with a sledgehammer. Trevor stumbled back, slamming his head against the side of the doorway on his way to the floor.

“Nice, Conner,” Todd said.

Trevor heard Victor start firing tranquilizer darts. Conner dodged from side to side, moving in quick, precise bursts, gradually worked his way down the hall toward Victor. Rolling over, Trevor saw Todd running off down the hall. Casting his pistol aside, Victor retreated from Conner, arms raised defensively.

Conner darted forward, his hands a blur as he issued blow after blow. Unable to divert the rapid onslaught, Victor staggered back like the victim of a machine gun, barely staying on his feet until Conner sent him flying with a vicious kick.

Roaring, Trevor tore down the hall. It felt good to get some speed behind his bulk. Turning, Conner looked alarmed. As Trevor reached out with his front claws, Conner jumped against the wall, then kicked off and sprang over the charging bear.

Trevor wheeled around just in time to receive a fierce kick to the head that knocked him onto his side. The stunning blow made a primal anger well up

inside of him.

“Stay on him,” Victor advised, charging forward. As he drew near to Conner, Victor twisted sideways just in time to avoid a supercharged flying kick. Having dodged the extended foot, Victor stuck out an arm in time to clothesline Conner and tackle him to the floor.

Grunting and scuffling, the two men wrestled until Trevor approached from behind and bit down hard on the top of Conner’s shoulder. Trevor shook his head to the side, slamming Conner into the wall. The ComKin went limp in his jaws.

“Good work,” Victor said, brushing off his suit. “It’s all about timing with a ComKin. You have to anticipate and counter the attack before it comes. Otherwise they move too quickly and hit too hard.”

“Are you all right?” Trevor asked.

“I’ll have some bruises,” Victor said, spitting blood onto the floor. “Todd ran off that way.” He motioned down the hall.

“Do we follow him?” Trevor asked.

“I don’t know,” Victor said. “I doubt he was running to Mozag.”

“We know they have at least one other ComKin,” Trevor said.

“Katie Sung,” Victor agreed, retrieving his tranquilizer pistol. He started reloading it. “This guy dodged a few darts, but I hit him a few times, too. He should have been out cold. He must have some kind of immunity. Or maybe Jonas White was somehow using a simulacrum to give him a boost.”

Victor started running down the hall in the direction Todd had fled. Trevor ran along beside him.

“Where are we going?” Trevor asked.

“Not sure,” Victor replied. “But I don’t want to hold still and let them bring the fight to us.”

Reaching an intersection, Victor turned left. Trevor rounded the corner a pace or two behind, letting Victor lead.

From up ahead, Trevor heard a strange clattering, like lumber being poured from a dump truck. “What’s that?”

“Don’t know,” Victor replied, not breaking stride.

Though nothing was visible down the hall, the clacking tumult drew nearer. Then a strange monstrosity bounded around the corner and came galloping toward them. Fashioned from wood, wires, and steel cables, the jumbled construct had no clear form. Considerably larger than a bear, it alternated between running on five and six legs, depending how it tilted. The overall impression was that a bizarre piece of modern art built from scrap wood had savagely come to life.

“Don’t back down,” Victor growled. “We have to fight our way through it.”

Trevor roared and increased to his full speed. The living lumber pile loomed larger than him, but a lot of it was empty space, and much of the wood looked rotted. Trevor bet that he had more mass.

The wooden monstrosity charged equally hard. They were playing chicken, and the enemy showed no sign of relenting. The gap between them closed quickly. Roaring and lunging, Trevor collided with the fearless construct. Wood snapped as Trevor collapsed the front end of the creature. The shock of impact sent Trevor reeling, and he and the construct tumbled end over end. Wires and cables tangled his limbs as Trevor thrashed against moving wooden segments. The more Trevor fought, the more the construct wrapped around him, caging him in wood and wires, tightening its hold rather than trading blows. His thick hide and fur protected him from feeling severe pain, but it was very frustrating to be so strong and yet feel so constrained.

Trevor could hear Victor beating against the wood. Trevor craned to see what was happening. The monstrosity shoved Victor with a wooden limb, sending the large investigator rolling to the floor.

“Go!” Trevor called. “We have each other tied up! This is your chance! Find Mozag.”

Victor regained his feet. “I’ll return for you.” Then he dashed away.

Pigeon watched as John Dart opened the door and collected four mosquitoes. Sirens continued to wail. John shut the door quickly and rushed the mosquitoes over to the kitchen table, where Mozag spread his hands over them, eyes closed. One of the little bugs twitched.

“Victor,” he said. “And a big bear.”

Another mosquito fluttered.

“Nothing of interest.”

A third bug spasmed.

Mozag opened his eyes. “Jonas sent his ungainly monstrosity to deal with the intruders. His sanctum is momentarily unguarded.”

John Dart strode to the counter. He grabbed a pair of locators Mozag had devised, then rushed to the door. Pigeon followed.

“Stay with Mozag,” John ordered as he opened the door.

“Don’t activate the locators until you’re inside the sanctum,” Mozag warned, not for the first time. “Because of his simulcratic connections, his sanctum is imperfect. But the locators will work better if you smuggle them in while dormant.”

“I’ll wait until after I cross the threshold,” John said.

“Let me come!” Pigeon demanded. “You might need help! What if you get

pinned down? While you fight them off, I can find the Source!”

“Too dangerous,” John said. “Jonas White will probably kill us when he finds out we’ve left our sanctum.”

“Not if we get the Source,” Pigeon said.

“Take him,” Mozag said. “This may be our only shot. Hurry.”

John tossed one of the locators to Pigeon, who dropped it but retrieved it quickly. John was already out the door. Pigeon hurried to catch up. Out in the hall, John raced ahead, lengthening his lead with every stride. Pigeon resisted calling to him to slow down. He knew that speed was essential. The commotion from the intrusion and the resultant alarm might temporarily prevent Jonas from realizing Pigeon and John had abandoned their sanctuary. But as soon as Jonas became aware, he could turn both of them into living statues—or worse.

John disappeared around a corner. Pigeon ran his fastest, worried about not getting to the corner in time to see John’s next turn. When Pigeon reached the corner, he saw John racing down the hall. A man lay on the ground in the distance. When John reached the fallen figure, he paused, searching his pockets, giving Pigeon a chance to gain ground.

“Sure you want to stay with me, Pigeon?” John asked without looking up.

“I’m sure,” Pigeon said.

“Ah-ha!”

“What?” Pigeon asked.

“Access card,” John said, holding up what looked like a credit card. “This is Conner Grady, one of Jonas White’s most trusted bodyguards.”

“I’m coming,” Pigeon said resolutely. He wanted to help John. He also wanted to run back to Mozag. He definitely didn’t want the wax figure used against him. But if this escape failed, would they get another chance? If they had to take down Jonas White now or never, shouldn’t he lend his help, even if he was underqualified?

“I can’t protect you,” John said. “I have to reach the Source at all cost. I have to find it and destroy it.”

“I won’t do any good back with Mozag,” Pigeon said.

John started running again, crouching to pick up a baseball bat near a doorway. “Try to stay with me.”

At the next intersection John kept running straight. Looking down the hall as he crossed it, Pigeon saw a bear tangled in some sort of trap made of wood and wire. The shaggy animal was wrestling fiercely, making the trap flop and writhe, the wood clattering and splitting.

Once again, John turned a small lead into a long one. Panting heavily, Pigeon tried to ignore the sharp pain in his side. Up ahead, John turned a corner.

Pigeon tucked his head and kept pumping his arms and legs. Despite his best efforts, he could not stay at a full sprint.

Pigeon made it past the corner in time to see John disappearing around another one. He hustled, worried about losing him. When he rounded the next corner, he found John receding down a long hall.

Breathing hard, Pigeon kept running, motivated by thoughts of running into enemies without John to help him. John turned again. It took Pigeon more than thirty paces to reach that intersection. When he got there, Pigeon found John standing before a large iron door at the end of the hall, looking back over his shoulder.

As soon as Pigeon came into view, John swiped the card he had taken from the unconscious bodyguard. Then he hauled open the door.

Pigeon glanced down at the locator in his hand. It looked suspiciously like a plastic Easter egg. But Mozag had explained that the tiny bubbles inside would work like Finder's Dust. The bubbles would remain inert until activated by contact with oxygen. Once active, the bubbles would be drawn to the most potent source of magical power in the area. If the bubbles were activated before entering Jonas White's sanctum, they could lose potency upon crossing the threshold.

"John Dart!" a strident voice warned, and Katie Sung sprang into view, wearing a black turtleneck and gray slacks. Through the doorway, beyond John and Katie, Pigeon saw a multitude of wax figures.

Katie blocked John from progressing into the room. For a moment they faced each other motionlessly. Then Katie pounced. John raised his bat to block her punch, and her fist broke it in half. Ducking, Katie spun and delivered a low, sweeping kick with impossible speed. John's feet were whipped out from under him so hard that he landed almost upside down.

Pigeon charged through the doorway and crushed the eggshell in his hand. Tiny bubbles floated free, no larger than peas. The air in the sanctum was much cooler than the air out in the corridor. Pigeon recognized many of the wax figures—he saw himself, his friends, and also figures of Katie, Cleon, Todd, and some of the other henchmen. Jonas White stood at the far side of the room. He looked enraged by the intrusion.

From his position on the ground, John kicked at Katie's legs, but she nimbly sprang away. He started to rise.

Katie pointed to Pigeon. "It's our lost Sub!"

"I can see," Jonas White said as he toddled toward a life-sized wax replica of John Dart. "Jeanine, if you will."

A slight, youngish girl whom Pigeon had never noticed before stepped

forward, palms facing him. Suddenly Pigeon was falling upward. Desperately twisting to avoid smashing his head, Pigeon slammed sideways against the ceiling; then gravity went back to normal, and he fell to the floor, landing hard, the breath crushed out of him.

John Dart was back on his feet. Jeanine held her palm toward him. John flipped as he fell upward, landing in a crouch on the ceiling, then flipped again, landing smoothly on the floor.

Scowling, Jeanine extended both palms at John. He hunched as if under the weight of an invisible burden. He took a couple of shaky steps to one side, his knees quivering unsteadily. “She’s a Crusher,” John panted. “Very rare. Can manipulate gravitational fields.”

John fell upward again, landing roughly against the ceiling. When he dropped back to the ground, he hit hard.

Pigeon looked to where his bubbles were collecting against a jade urn upon a recessed shelf on the far side of the room. There appeared to be more bubbles than had come from his egg, which led him to conclude John must have released his bubbles as well.

Jonas White reached the wax figure of John Dart and inserted a needle at the back of the neck. John instantly went rigid.

Katie Sung relaxed, turning her attention to Pigeon. “You sided with the wrong team,” she said.

Victor Battiato burst into the room and skidded to a halt. “What the devil?” he asked, taking in the scene.

“The urn is his power source,” Pigeon blurted, pointing. “The green one in the niche. We’re up against a ComKin and a Crusher.”

Victor aimed his tranquilizer pistol but fell upward before he fired. He smacked against the ceiling on his side. As he dropped back toward the floor, Katie interrupted his fall with a brutal flying kick that made him land in a painful tumble. His pistol clattered to the floor.

The bear Pigeon had glimpsed earlier loped into the room, its shaggy fur matted in some places, ruffled in others. Katie dove to recover the tranquilizer pistol. She rapidly unloaded the gun into the bear.

The bulky bear staggered. “Uh-oh,” it said in a very humanlike voice.

“The urn in the niche,” Victor urged, rising and pointing.

Katie attacked, kicking the bear in the side hard enough to knock it over. After skidding to a stop, the bear flew up to the ceiling, then flopped back to the floor.

Pigeon crawled toward the urn. Everybody seemed distracted by the fight. He worried that if he got up and ran he might draw attention. He was getting

close. Behind him, Victor was fighting Katie. The bear no longer moved. Jeanine sat down, rubbing her temples, her brow glistening with perspiration.

Slowly but steadily, Pigeon kept crawling. He was almost there. The jade urn was less than five yards away. He rose to his feet and charged. His body abruptly went rigid and he fell onto his side, landing just shy of the niche. As he went down, out of the corner of his eye, Pigeon glimpsed Jonas White near a wax figure of an eleven-year-old boy in a black leather jacket.

Trapped on his side, Pigeon couldn't move his eyes. He couldn't move his lips. He found himself staring at the paralyzed form of John Dart. Behind John, Katie had subdued Victor Battiato.

The attempt to destroy the Source was over. They had failed. Immobilized and utterly helpless, Pigeon dreaded what might come next.

Desperate Measures



A hundred feet above Arcadeland, Nate pulled up beside Lindy. As they hovered together in the darkness, a lone car motored along the dark street. A few other vehicles hibernated in the parking lot below.

They had not caught up with Chris and Risa on the way back from the bay. Nate assumed the other Jets had been flying at full throttle to ensure the Protector would make it back safely.

“See any Tanks?” Nate asked.

“All clear,” Lindy confirmed, eyes sweeping the area. “Chris and Risa are waiting for us inside, just beyond the main doors. I would guess they only beat us here by a minute or two. They’re with Katie Sung and Cleon.”

“Can you see anyone else?”

“No. Some people are probably in the basement or the other rooms and halls that I can’t perceive.”

“Chris and Risa have the Protector? We won?”

“Right.”

Nate sighed. Jonas White now had everything he needed to go after Uweya. If he and Lindy wanted to trip him up, they needed to act now. Nate worried that he might have already waited too long.

“We need to start putting up more of a fight,” Nate said. “We keep waiting for the right opportunity, and it never comes. Jonas has what he wanted. He might send us to go after Uweya, and then again he might not. What if he quits using us? What if he tries to keep us here?”

“You think he might send his own people after Uweya?”

“Maybe,” Nate said. “Or he might hold us here until he sends us. He’s so close to winning, he won’t want to risk blowing it. We can’t get stuck here. Jonas has already proven that he doesn’t mind making kids disappear. I should

probably take off. I need to try to get a plan together. We're the last line of defense."

"Should I come with you?" Lindy asked.

Nate hesitated, trying to think through the best strategy. "Somebody should stay at Arcadeland," he decided. "There's a chance Jonas will go after Uweya right away. Just like we can't afford to get trapped at Arcadeland, we also can't afford to leave Jonas or the other Jets alone."

"How do I explain your absence?"

"Tell him I got hurt," Nate suggested, his mind racing to find better excuses. "Tell him I was stressed that we almost drowned Roman. Tell him I wanted to see Mr. Stott about it."

"What if he sends us after Uweya while you're gone?"

"Break your button," Nate said. "We'll need all the help we can get. Try to convince Chris and Risa to help us. Jonas has the Gate and the Protector. We can't let them get used."

"What are you going to do? Are you really going to Mr. Stott?"

"I'll go there first," Nate said. "That will help your story check out. Hopefully Mr. Stott can help me get rid of this tracking bracelet. I really can use whatever advice I can get. Once we make a plan, I'll do whatever it takes. Maybe I'll end up attacking Arcadeland with the Battiatos. If so, we'll probably be glad to have you inside. Stay ready to help."

"Okay."

"I'm not ditching you," Nate pledged. "I just don't know what else to do."

"It's all right," Lindy assured him, trying to fake a brave smile. "I get it. We need to take action, and we can't leave Arcadeland unwatched. I agree. One of us should stay and one should go. I'll do what I can until you come with the cavalry."

"I should get out of here."

"Go," she urged. "We're out of time. You're right—it's now or never."

"Be careful."

"You too."

Nate flew away.

As he cruised at his top speed, buildings and streets streaked by beneath him, and cool air washed over him. It didn't take long to reach the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. Landing in the back, Nate rapped on the door. After a prolonged pause, he knocked again. The door opened a moment later.

"Come inside," Mr. Stott said, alert eyes gazing beyond Nate into the night.

Nate entered hastily. "We got the Protector," he said. "It's the last thing Jonas White needs to go after Uweya."

“You delivered it to him?” Mr. Stott exclaimed.

“The other Jets handed it over, along with Lindy. I wasn’t sure what else to do. Jonas has simulacra of us, and the Tanks could track us. If we had tried to run, we wouldn’t have made it far. I guess the next step will be to track down the Battiatos.”

“They’ve already been here,” Mr. Stott said. “Ziggy is upstairs taking refuge in my sanctum. Trevor and Victor went after Pigeon and Mozag a few hours ago.”

“What?” Nate cried. “How’d it go?”

“Not well,” Mr. Stott grumbled. “John Dart and Pigeon got out of their cells and tried to help, but they were captured along with Victor and Trevor.”

“Wait,” Nate said. “If they were all captured, how could you know what happened?”

“Victor recently regained consciousness,” Mr. Stott explained. “He was out for some time. When he revived, he transferred much of his strength back to Ziggy. In the process, he managed to also transmit a great deal of information.”

“Like what?”

Mr. Stott glanced toward his apartment. “It might be safer to let Ziggy explain. Jonas White shouldn’t be able to eavesdrop on us in my lair, but he certainly won’t be able to overhear us in my sanctum. You look haggard. Would you care for a refreshment?”

“Sure,” Nate said, realizing it had been some time since he had a bite.

“Something sweet and nutritious?”

“I’d take that.”

“Go on up. Get filled in. The treat will take me a minute or two.”

Nate flew up the stairs. Flight required less energy than walking, and he was feeling pretty weary. Now that he had reached the relative safety of the candy shop, it was like his body knew it could unwind.

Nate entered the apartment, glided to the sanctum, and knocked.

“Come in,” Ziggy called.

Nate opened the door. Ziggy looked young and bloated with muscle. Nate raised his eyebrows. “Dude, you’re a beast.”

Ziggy smirked. “Wish I wasn’t. It’s a reminder that Victor ran into more trouble than he could handle. What’s the latest?”

“Jonas White has the Protector. The other Jets brought it to him tonight. He can go after Uweya whenever he wants.”

Tilting his head back, Ziggy closed his eyes. His thick neck bulged. “This keeps getting stickier. We’re up against the ropes getting pummeled, and Jonas shows no hint of letting up.”

“I heard that Victor and Trevor got caught.”

Ziggy let out a defeated sigh. “Without freeing anyone. We’re running out of allies. And Jonas has some heavy hitters working for him.”

“Mr. Stott told me you got some info from Victor?”

“Might be our one ray of hope,” Ziggy said. “We’ve always shared a strong connection. Victor managed to send a lot of information when he transferred his vitality to me. Poor guy must be in lousy shape.” Ziggy rolled one of his shoulders and rubbed his chest. “I felt how brutally he got hammered. I’m still achy all over.”

“What did he learn?”

“Victor and Trevor made it to Jonas White’s sanctum. John and Pigeon beat them there. John was going for the throat. He wanted to take out the Source.”

“The Source?”

“A Simulcrist needs a steady stream of magical power to energize his many connections. This power source is both his strength and his weakness. With it, he can manipulate many complicated enchantments at once. Without it, the connections would unravel. Jonas keeps his Source in his sanctum. It’s a jade vase.”

“I take it they didn’t destroy the Source?” Nate checked.

“They got into the room,” Ziggy said. “Impressive, since it was locked with a keycard. John must have lifted it off a guard. They almost succeeded, but the sanctum was well defended. Jonas used his simulacra to paralyze John and Pigeon. Katie Sung and a Crusher dealt with Victor and Trevor.”

“A Crusher?”

“They can manipulate gravity—reverse it, decrease it, increase it. I don’t know where Jonas found her. Maybe he helped create her. It’s a very rare ability.”

“Did Victor free Pidge and John?”

“I don’t know how they got free,” Ziggy said. “I only know that they beat Trevor and Victor to the sanctum, then got recaptured. Victor never encountered Mozag.”

Mr. Stott entered the room, balancing three smoothies on a tray. “Berry colada,” he announced. “Fortified with protein, quality carbs, and an herbal assortment of pick-me-ups. Try it.”

Nate accepted a tall glass and sucked the pink liquid through a thick straw. Coconut dominated the flavor, sweet and strong, accented by the berries. Only a faint graininess hinted at the protein and other additives.

“It’s amazing,” Nate said. “Thanks.”

“Did you show him the map?” Mr. Stott asked Ziggy, offering him a glass.

Ziggy claimed a smoothie, then leaned over and picked up a sheet of graph paper off a small table. "I saw what Victor saw. This should be close to the actual layout. It's incomplete, but better than a poke in the eye."

Sipping his smoothie, Nate studied the paper. Half of the sheet was labeled LEVEL ONE, the other half BASEMENT. Nate recognized the main arcade room at Arcadeland, then a single hall that led to a stairway. The basement diagram displayed several intersecting corridors. Most of the hallways ran some distance and then stopped, not at a wall, but open-ended, as if the mapmaker hadn't known where they went. The halls that were intact led from the stairway to a room labeled SANCTUM.

"If we destroy the Source, Jonas goes down?" Nate verified.

"It would pull the plug on his simulcry," Mr. Stott said around his straw. "He'd still have his engineered apprentices and whatever other magic he knows."

Nate stared at the graph paper. "If Jonas knows I'm coming, he could freeze me like he did to Pigeon and John."

"Freeze you or worse," Mr. Stott agreed. "He'll be on his guard after tonight. The sanctum will be locked. His henchmen will be on high alert. Not only did Jonas just repel a potentially devastating assault, but he has also just acquired the object he needs to ensure his success. He'll be protecting his interests with every asset at his disposal."

"What do you think, Ziggy?" Nate inquired.

"If the two of us charge in fully loaded, we'll promptly be escorted to private cells of our own. I'd never tell him this, but Victor is at least as competent as I am in combat. So is Dart. Your friend Trevor went in as a Kodiak bear."

"He was using a new treat I invented," Mr. Stott interjected.

Ziggy rubbed his big hands together. "No bologna? If they failed to win through with twice our numbers and surprise on their side, our chances of pulling off a direct assault are less than zero."

Nate turned to Mr. Stott. "Any other new surprises up your sleeve?"

"I wish," Mr. Stott sighed. "Ziggy is right. A frontal assault doesn't sound promising. I have more of my Bestial Biscuits, but you can't risk changing into an animal while your stamp remains active. I don't have another Sands of Time. I would require a team of assistants and a long, arduous retreat to produce another."

"I've called for backup," Ziggy mentioned. "Highest priority alert. But our closest available operatives won't get here until tomorrow afternoon."

"Which might be too late," Nate said. "We have Lindy. She stayed behind

to keep watch. She could help. Both of us can fly.”

“And both of you can be petrified or worse at the whim of Jonas White,” Mr. Stott reminded him. “He really has engineered an extremely advantageous scenario.”

“Maybe I could go to the Hermit,” Nate proposed. “He had some amulet that protected him from simulcry.”

“Think he would hook you up?” Ziggy snorted. “A talisman like that could take years to produce. No way would he surrender his.”

“What if I took it?” Nate asked. “I’ve kept a couple canisters of pepper spray in reserve, just in case. I mean, we’re desperate. I’d give it back.”

“Take it by force?” Mr. Stott mused. “Such an item might be uniquely attuned to the Hermit himself. It might not shield another.”

“But if it happened to work, we could sure use it,” Ziggy said. “Can you find the Hermit?”

“I think I know where he’ll be,” Nate said. “I told him I would try to return the Gate to him. He told me where to find him. It would be a pretty big betrayal if I showed up and swiped his amulet. I guess I could ask first.”

Ziggy chuckled. “Right. Feel free to write the request on my personal stationery. I’m sure he’ll be anxious to comply.”

Mr. Stott suddenly sat up straight. “Someone is at the back door.” He hurried out of the room. Nate flew after him.

Mr. Stott rushed down the stairs and answered the door. Summer stepped into the candy shop.

“You got away!” Nate cried, giving her an enthusiastic hug. She hugged him in return, tilting back to lift him off the ground with her embrace. Her clothes were mangled. She felt a little damp. “Put me down,” he complained.

“Everything feels so light,” she replied, setting him on his feet.

“Maybe I was flying,” Nate said.

“Maybe I’m a Tank.”

“What happened?” Mr. Stott asked.

“I ditched the other Tanks on my way back to Arcadeland. I told Roman that I was done with all of this. I acted hysterical. He tried to tell me that I didn’t need to leave, that our part was already finished, but I wouldn’t listen to him. I think they all bought that I had been pushed over the edge. It probably helped that I wasn’t completely faking it.”

“Get to the sanctum,” Mr. Stott ordered. “It’s the guest bedroom. Otherwise, Jonas White could use your simulacrum at any moment to—”

He stopped speaking as Summer streaked away, dashing up the stairs in a blur of speed. Nate and Mr. Stott returned to the apartment to find her waiting in

the sanctum with Ziggy.

Summer had questions, so they filled her in regarding all that had happened. She looked as dismayed as Nate felt.

“Summer has tank and racecar stamps working together,” Nate pointed out. “Would her help make a direct attack more possible?”

“More possible than without her,” Ziggy allowed. “But success would remain highly unlikely. Summer shares the same vulnerability that limits you and Lindy—once Mr. White realizes that she has turned on him, he’ll go after her with her simulacrum.”

“I probably shouldn’t have left Lindy at Arcadeland,” Nate worried. “Jonas knows that me, Lindy, Pigeon, Trevor, and Summer are all friends, and that we’re all involved with you, Mr. Stott. Pigeon and Trevor attacked. Summer has run away. What if he retaliates against Lindy?”

“He might,” Mr. Stott observed grimly.

“Could he use her simulacrum to restore her memory?” Summer asked quietly.

“Not by any means known to me,” Mr. Stott said. “But I’m unwilling to rule out anything. Jonas White has proven himself disturbingly resourceful.”

Bowing his head, Nate covered his eyes with his hands. “This is a giant mess. Jonas has to suspect I’m up to something. He could use my simulacrum at any time.”

Summer scowled thoughtfully. “But if we all stay hidden in this sanctum, who’ll stop him from getting Uweya? That could make him invincible, right?”

“I wish we knew more about the true nature of Uweya,” Mr. Stott murmured.

Summer brightened. “William Graywater seemed to know a lot about it. More than he told us. Maybe if we went back to him and explained everything, he could give us some pointers. He definitely doesn’t want Uweya found.”

Ziggy gave a heavy shrug. “Might be worth a shot. Want me to head over there? Jonas has no simulacrum of me.”

“I’m not sure he’d open up to an engineered apprentice,” Mr. Stott said.

Ziggy straightened his tie. “Technically, I’m not engineered. I’m cursed.”

“Whatever the distinction,” Mr. Stott clarified, “you’ve been permanently altered and you work for Mozag. I can’t imagine the Graywaters dealing with you.”

“I’ll go,” Nate offered. “The Jets won the contest. Jonas might suspect me, but he has no official grounds to come after me.”

“That might not stop him,” Summer warned. “You bailed. There’s no telling what he might do. What if he freezes you while you’re flying?”

“I’ll hope I’m over water,” Nate mumbled. “I’m not sure what else we can do. Jonas is in a strong position. Seems like the surest way to get steamrolled by him would be to do nothing.”

“Kid’s got a point,” Ziggy said. “Whatever measures we take will be risky. Gathering info about Uweya could be our best chance.”

Mr. Stott leveled his gaze at Nate. “Are you sure you’re up for this?”

“I’m willing,” Nate said. “We have to try something.” He held up a hand. “But I need to lose this bracelet. Otherwise Jonas will be able to track my movements easily.”

“I can take care of that.” Mr. Stott shifted his gaze to Summer. “Can you show Nate how to reach the Graywater home?”

“Can you get me a map?” Summer asked.

Air whistled past Nate as he rocketed through the night at his maximum speed. He had paused only once to consult the map. Ahead, light shone from just a few of the windows at the Devil’s Shadow Mobile Home Park.

Nate had decided to visit the Graywater family first. A trip to the Hermit would also be important, but information about Uweya seemed like his most urgent need. Another hour or two of vulnerability would hopefully make little difference. If Jonas White had meant to incapacitate Nate with his simulacrum, he probably would have already done so.

Nate easily spotted the nice trailer with the tidy yard at the far side of the park. He landed on the front porch, feet pounding heavily against the artificial turf. Although light glowed from the windows, Nate could hear no activity inside. He pulled open the screen and knocked.

William answered, wearing a snug black T-shirt and faded jeans. “Who are you?”

“I’m your last hope of protecting Uweya.”

William closed his eyes, his mouth tightening. For a moment, Nate got the impression that he was restraining harsh emotions. When his eyes opened, William appeared calm. “What do you want from me?”

“I want to know how I can help,” Nate said. “Jonas White has the Protector.”

The muscles at the sides of William’s jaw bulged conspicuously. “So it was Jonas.” He stepped aside. “Come in.”

Nate entered the trailer, mildly surprised by how much it looked like a regular house on the inside. “You alone?” Nate asked.

“The others left,” William said. “Probably wise. Not that there will be anyplace to hide if Jonas succeeds.”

“Why’d you stay?”

Moving with an easy grace, William slumped into an armchair. “Maybe I’m punishing myself. Maybe I think ground zero is the best place to face an atomic blast. Maybe I still harbor a shred of hope. One of the girls who stole the guidestone seemed torn. It seemed as though she wanted to help. Maybe I wanted her to be able to find me.”

“Summer,” Nate said. “She sent me. She couldn’t come because her club lost the assignment to retrieve the Protector. Jonas has a simulacrum of her. She has to stay in a shielded place.”

“I take it your club won?”

Nate tried to think of an evasive reply. He failed. “We did.”

William shook his head. “How does it feel?”

“What do you mean?”

“Changing the course of human history. Making the whole planet slaves to the whims of a maniacal mage.”

“It isn’t over yet,” Nate said firmly.

“What can you do? Are you super strong? Super quick?”

“I can fly,” Nate said. “Through air or water.”

“You need to work on your landings,” William advised. “It sounded like you dropped a bowling ball out there. Was the Protector underwater?”

Nate nodded.

“Thought so.”

An uncomfortable silence ensued.

“We need to learn about Uweya,” Nate finally said.

“We?” William taunted. “You and Jonas? Did he send you?” William regarded Nate intently.

“No. I’m working with a magician called Sebastian Stott. I’ve been against Jonas White from the start. He kidnapped some of my friends.”

“Go on,” William invited.

Nate related all that had happened. He told how Mozag and John Dart were abducted. He shared how he and his friends became involved with the clubs in order to spy on the operation. He explained about the Battiatos. William said little. He listened impassively, occasionally asking clarifying questions.

After Nate finished, William leaned forward in his chair, palms together, thick veins visible on the backs of his long hands. “Quite a story. Of course, you may not have spoken a word of truth. You might have cooked up that tale to help Jonas White learn more about Uweya before he goes after it.”

“I guess I could have,” Nate admitted. “But I didn’t.”

“Maybe,” William said. “I need to be sure. Would you submit to a test? It

involves an ancient tribal ritual. It's basically a magical lie detector."

"Sure," Nate said, relieved. A test like that would allow him to prove his honesty. "How do we do it?"

"It never fails," William warned.

"Perfect," Nate said.

William nodded pensively. "I have no such test. But you seemed willing—happy, even. Either you're a master deceiver, or you're telling the truth."

"You'll help me?"

William rubbed the arms of his chair. "When will Jonas go after Uweya?"

"I'm not sure," Nate said. "Soon, I expect. I'll probably be sent to help, along with the other kids in my club."

"Where do the other kids stand?" William asked.

"One has helped me since the start," Nate said. "I think the other two are on my side as well."

"You aren't sure?"

"Sure enough to risk my life."

William narrowed his eyes. "You truly mean to thwart him?"

"No way will I let him get Uweya. I was hoping that if I understood more about Uweya, I'd be in a better position to mess up his plans."

William folded his hands and stared at them for a moment. "You haven't stopped Jonas yet. Why didn't you act earlier? What makes you think you can stop him now?"

"I don't know that I can!" Nate cried. "I kept waiting for a good opportunity." He took a shuddering breath, trying to get a grip on his frustration. "I wanted some clue to where the prisoners were held. I wanted to get below Arcadeland unobserved. The chance never came. So I'm out of options. It's now or never, and I'm not okay with never."

"Just because you need to stop him doesn't mean you'll be able to."

"But I have to try," Nate replied. "He has a simulacrum of me. That has been hanging over my head since just after I became a Jet, but I might have found a way to break that hold. If I'm invited to go after Uweya, the others in my club will help me sabotage the mission. Even if I'm not invited, I'll go anyhow. Even without your help, I'll still try. But I'd rather have what help I can scrounge."

Inhaling loudly through his nose, William rubbed his thighs. "I'm not going to fill you in about Uweya. Even if you are sincerely working against Jonas, if he has a simulacrum of you, he may have ways of extracting that information."

"I'm on my own?" Nate asked.

William shook his head. "I'll help in every way that I can." Rooting in his

pocket, he withdrew a keychain attached to a short strand of beads and a few wispy feathers. "This token is given voluntarily." He held it out to Nate.

"What's this?"

"The invisible keys to Uweya."

"Really?"

"No, not really. This token confirms you a friend of the Graywater family. There is a carwash in Fresno where it can get you half off. Also, if you can reach Uweya ahead of the others, it may help you get assistance."

"Seriously?"

William gave a nod.

"I should try to get to Uweya first? Ahead of the others?"

William settled back in his chair. "If Jonas claims Uweya, he will become the most powerful man on Earth. No exaggeration. But if you get there ahead of his people, with this token in hand, you might be able to use Uweya against him."

"You won't tell me how?"

"It won't be easy," William warned. "Use the token. This is the best I can do. I won't tell you more."

"Would you come with me?" Nate asked. "Maybe follow us in secret?"

William rubbed his mouth, perhaps covering a grin. "I know some secrets about the way to Uweya. Without an enhancement like yours, I could never get close. It's all up to you."

"Is it underwater?" Nate asked.

"I don't believe water will be an issue."

"Okay," Nate said. "Thanks for the keychain."

"Thanks for trying. It's more than many would do."

"You can't give me a better clue about Uweya?"

"I sent my family away in case your employer came to me and tried to use them as leverage to get me to reveal all I know. I've told you all that should be told." William extended a hand toward the door.

"Bye," Nate said as he exited.

"Good hunting."

Nate soared through the darkness, rising and falling, using the wind of his speed and occasional acrobatic maneuvers to keep his mind alert. It was late. He was feeling the effects of a long, taxing, uncertain day. And there was still more to accomplish.

Upon reaching the *Striker*, he veered north, watching for the three hills of equal height where the Hermit was supposedly hiding. He found them as

described, and on the north side of the farthest hill, he discovered the mouth of a cave.

With a canister of pepper spray in hand, Nate alighted just beyond the cave entrance. The cave appeared dark and still. He wished he had Lindy with him to reveal who or what might be hiding inside.

“Hello?” Nate called. “I’m back!”

“Why bring the inflammatory agent?” a scholarly voice responded from the blackness. “Have you the Gate?”

“No Gate,” Nate confessed.

“Then why have you come? To rob me again? To take me hostage? To gloat about the end of the world?”

One of the questions made Nate particularly uncomfortable. He *had* come prepared to rob the Hermit again. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“I need your help,” Nate said.

“The magic words we victims hope to one day hear from our attackers.”

“It’s an emergency,” Nate said.

“I do owe you a lot of favors,” the Hermit said sarcastically. “You drove me from my home, assaulted me, scalded me, and robbed me. I’ve been praying I could find some way to repay your generosity. How can I be of service?”

“It isn’t just for me,” Nate said. “Everyone needs your help. Including you. Jonas White has the Protector.”

Still unseen in the darkness, the Hermit sighed wearily. “Of course he does.”

“He’ll be going after Uweya. I’ll probably be involved.”

“That certainly fits your profile.”

“We have to stop him.”

The Hermit laughed wildly. “You are turning understatement into an art form.”

“He has a simulacrum of me,” Nate explained.

“Now we’re talking,” the Hermit said with relish. “I’d love to get my hands on that!”

“His simulacrum of me would make it impossible for me to beat him.”

“Many things will make it impossible to beat him,” the Hermit scoffed. “If Jonas has the Gate and the Protector, his quest is essentially complete. You’ve already handed him victory. He need only claim his prize.”

“Jonas hasn’t won yet,” Nate protested. “William Graywater told me that if I reach Uweya first, I may be able to use it against Jonas.”

“You?” the Hermit mocked. “What do you know of Uweya? Now I know you’re telling tall tales. As if William Graywater would trust you!”

“His idea, not mine,” Nate insisted, digging in his pocket for the keychain. “He gave me this.” Nate held up the totem.

The Hermit offered no reply. After a long pause, he stepped out of the darkness of the cave, his skin ghastly pale beneath the moonlight.

“How did you get that?” the Hermit asked slowly.

“William gave it to me.”

“Yes,” the Hermit marveled. “It was freely given. How did you convince him?”

“I told him the truth.”

The Hermit rubbed the back of his arm roughly. He glanced around, then took a long look back at his cave. He seemed torn. “Very well. What aid do you seek?”

“I need protection from my simulacrum,” Nate said.

The Hermit stared flatly. A membrane briefly shimmered over his eyeballs. “You wish to strip me of protection?”

“I’ll bring it back,” Nate said uncomfortably.

“Like you brought the Gate back?” the Hermit erupted. “If I refuse to hand it over, do you plan to hurt me again?”

“I’m trying to save the world,” Nate sighed.

“A Simulcrist needs protection. Especially a homeless, friendless Simulcrist. I don’t have much. I don’t ask for much. I did not cause this problem. You’ve wronged me in the past. Why should I take a risk for you?”

“It won’t just be bad for me if Jonas wins,” Nate said. “It’ll be bad for you. Bad for everyone.”

The Hermit shook his head. “I’ve always been adept at avoiding attention. I keep to myself. I no longer have anything that Jonas wants.”

“Would your amulet work on me?” Nate asked.

The Hermit considered him in silence. “If freely given, I could make it work.”

“You don’t want Jonas to get Uweya,” Nate said.

“Correct. There are many people I don’t want to get Uweya. In fact, I don’t want anyone to get it. Including you. That’s why I kept the Gate with me! Then you came along and stole it! For all I know, you delivered Jonas the Protector as well.”

“I kind of did,” Nate admitted. “It wasn’t what I wanted, but he has the simulacrum of me.”

The Hermit folded his arms. “This is preposterous! You’re a hoodlum!”

Nate struggled to think of a way to convince the Hermit. He didn’t seem very concerned about others, but at least he acted interested in himself. “You’re a

Simulcrist. No matter how good you are at hiding, that makes you a target. Jonas is too careful and too paranoid. He won't rest until you're captured or killed. With Uweya, he'll find you no matter what necklaces you hide behind."

The Hermit held very still. Nate held his breath. On the hillside around them, insects chirped.

"You're right," the Hermit finally said. "Unfair though it may be, you're absolutely correct. Very well, I'll lend you my charm. I lack a better option. A long shot is better than no shot."

Nate couldn't resist a relieved smile.

"Don't look at me like that! This is no victory for you. My charm has been yours since I saw what William gave you. You're in serious trouble. We all are!"

"At least we'll have a chance," Nate said.

The Hermit gave a halfhearted shrug. He slipped the twine over his bald head. The metallic figure eight swung gently. "Come here."

Nate approached.

Muttering mysterious words, the Hermit looped the amulet around Nate's neck. His breath reeked of fish. "This will shield you from simulcry. It will be virtually impossible for a Simulcrist to perceive unless he actively works simulcry against you."

"Thanks," Nate said.

"Don't thank me," the Hermit said. "I don't like you. It was foolish of you to take the Gate. I have zero tolerance for fools. But you happen to be the least terrible of several terrible options. If you're willing to risk yourself to stop Jonas, I'm willing to let you assume that risk."

"All right."

"Don't try to find me to return my charm. I won't be here. If you succeed, I'll find you. If you fail, you'll have bigger problems than returning borrowed enchantments. Don't fail."

"Is there anything—"

"This is all I can do for you," the Hermit interrupted. "I'm now unshielded. There are measures I must take. Go."

The Hermit turned and ran off down the slope. Nate waited for a minute, listening to him crunching through the brush, then took flight.

When Nate reached his house, he landed gently on the roof near his window. He had been concerned about falling asleep in midair, but now he was home. Body and mind ached for sleep. All he currently desired was to crawl into bed.

Nate had stopped by Arcadeland on his way home. It had appeared closed

and quiet. There was no sign of Lindy or the other Jets. Either Jonas had let them go home or he was keeping them there. Either way, Nate had decided there was not much he could do at the moment. Exhausted, he had chosen not to worry about Jonas until morning.

Nate slid open his window, climbed through, and found Lindy waiting on his bed. She sat primly, hands folded on her lap.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“You freaked me out,” Nate said, a hand on his chest. “I’m okay. What’s up?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she asked in a small voice.

Nate froze. “Tell you what?” His mind raced to consider all the possible meanings of her question. She sounded hurt and upset.

“That I’m Belinda White.”

Nate sagged. He felt a turbulent mix of guilt, regret, frustration, and disbelief. He wiped his tired eyes with his hands. Weren’t things bad enough? How could everything keep getting worse?

“Who told you?”

“Who do you think, Nate?”

Nate sat down on the floor. How was he supposed to handle this? “What now?”

“Jonas wants me to spy on you,” Lindy said. “I told him that I would.”

“Isn’t the first rule of spying to keep it a secret?”

“Only if you’re actually going to do it.”

“Right,” Nate said sheepishly. “So you’re not here to kill me?”

“Nate!”

“What? Belinda wasn’t very nice. We tried not to mention her too much when you were around. It seemed wrong to talk about you behind your back right in front of you.”

“Thanks for being so considerate,” Lindy said with an edge to her voice.

Nate studied her. She didn’t look any more evil than before. “How are you feeling?”

“I don’t know. Angry. Confused. Ashamed. It’s a pretty big list. At first I was really mad at you guys for hiding who I am. Then I cooled down and started thinking more clearly. Now I can’t understand why you guys have been so nice to me. Didn’t I almost wreck your lives?”

“In a way, it wasn’t you,” Nate said. “You don’t act like her. You seem like an entirely different person.”

“Really?” she asked eagerly, as if she desperately wanted to believe his words.

“How much did he tell you?” Nate wondered.

“You used a Clean Slate to wipe my mind. I created it and entrusted it to you. Then you used it against me. Is that true?”

Nate nodded. “Do you know who you wanted me to use it on?”

She shook her head.

“Mr. Stott.”

“Dad?”

“That’s right.”

“Why?” Lindy whispered.

“He was competition,” Nate said. “You wanted the Fountain of Youth. Magic works better on the young. You would have become very powerful. You were trying to take over the town.”

“I wanted Uweya,” Lindy murmured numbly. “Jonas told me that was my ultimate goal.”

“We never knew about that,” Nate said. “We knew we had to stop you. Putting the Clean Slate into the water from the Fountain of Youth seemed like the only way. You became young, but you also lost your identity. I gave you some of your own medicine.”

Tears glistened in her eyes, even the false one. “You did the right thing.”

Nate got to his feet. “Lindy—”

“No. I’m not looking for sympathy. You did what you had to do. I’m glad you did it. Jonas told me that you stole my life. He promised to help me finish what I started. He said he would help me regain what I lost. But I see it a different way. You gave me a second chance, Nate. A chance to change. A chance to be better.” Her brow furrowed. “Or maybe I’m kidding myself. Maybe it’s just a matter of time.”

“Before you become evil again?”

She let out a nervous laugh. “I guess. I don’t feel any wicked urges. I don’t *want* to become whoever I was. I like who I am now. Everyone has been lying to me, but they had a good reason. They were kind lies. Protective lies. It’s hard to know the truth, but I’m glad I do. Everything fits now. Why dad was so worried about Arcadeland. Why you guys were so evasive about my past. I knew you guys cared about me. I knew you were my friends. But I also felt sure you were hiding something. All the little inconsistencies that nagged at me have fallen into place. At least it all makes sense now.”

Nate could not keep eye contact with her. “Sorry you found out from him.”

“He did me a favor,” Lindy said. “It probably had to be him. You guys cared about me too much. You were trying to protect me from my past. But I’m glad I know. I’m relieved the truth came out. It’s hard to face, but I needed to

hear it.”

Nate felt relieved by her reaction. He wanted to give her a hug. She seemed to need one. He approached where she sat on his bed and placed a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

Her chin quivered. “Not really. How would you feel if you found out you used to be somebody horrible? I was afraid it would be something like this. I was afraid maybe my parents had been bad people. But the truth of it tops all of my worst fears.”

“You don’t have to go down the same path,” Nate said. “You don’t have to become who you used to be.”

Standing, Lindy threw her arms around him. Tears flowed freely. “I hope not! I hate Jonas! I hate Belinda! I don’t want to be like them!”

Nate hugged her back. “It’s okay. It’s all right.”

Lindy sniffed and ran her sleeve across her eyes. “I’m supposed to tempt you. My assignment is to test your loyalty to Jonas. I’m supposed to tell you that I learned how we can take him down. I’m supposed to lead you into a trap tonight.”

“You agreed to it?” Nate asked.

She nodded. “I agreed so I could misinform him. I acted angry that you guys had hidden my past from me. I explained that I had felt something was wrong, that you were all lying to me, that I couldn’t trust any of you. I told him I wanted to learn about my real past. He promised to help me. He promised that after obtaining Uweya he would raise me like a father.”

“What now?” Nate asked.

Lindy backed away from the embrace. “I’ll tell him that you wouldn’t take the bait. That you passed the test. I’ll tell him you decided the best way to help your friends would be to make sure you were on the winning side. I’ll tell him you warned me that we can’t beat him. I’ll tell him you want to go after Uweya.”

“Will he believe you?”

She shrugged. “I think so. We’ll see. We’re supposed to meet to go after Uweya in the morning. What do we do, Nate? I’m honestly not sure we can stop him. Did you know the others tried some sort of jailbreak tonight?”

“Yeah, I found out from Mr. Stott.”

“How is he doing?” Lindy asked.

“He’s fine. He’s worried. Jonas added Trevor and Victor to his other prisoners. He’s all geared up to repel another assault.”

“He’s definitely paying more attention to security.”

Nate debated how much he should reveal about his plan. Lindy seemed to be truly on his side, but it was still hard to place full confidence in her. “We have

a new strategy. We need to go after Uweya. I need to get there first. If I do, there are some things I might be able to do to stop Jonas.”

“What things?”

“I talked to William Graywater. He told me that I’d figure it out when I get there. He made it sound like this is basically our last chance.”

“We won’t be going in alone,” Lindy warned. “Jonas will be sending some of his people to secure Uweya. We’ll learn more in the morning. We’re supposed to be there early, like five-thirty. Tallah will refresh our powers. You need rest. You’re worn out. Just show up tomorrow. I’ll go convince Jonas that you’re with us.”

“I doubt he’ll believe you.”

“I’ll make him believe enough to let you come. I don’t think he trusts any of us. We’ll be chaperoned. Who knows what he might do to us with our simulacra? There might not be much we can do. But we’ll try. I should go.”

As she started toward the window, Nate gripped her upper arm. “Lindy, be careful.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “Let me handle my brother. Get some sleep. We’ll both need to be at our best tomorrow.”

Lindy went and flew out the window. Nate closed it. He started pacing. Maybe it was good that Lindy had learned about her past. Or maybe the whole conversation had been an act. Maybe the trap was already closing in around him.

She had been right about one thing. He needed sleep. He could hardly think straight. He carefully set his alarm for five, then crawled into bed. His mattress and pillow had never felt more inviting. Before he could stress about anything else, he fell asleep.

The Gate



The approaching sunrise was beginning to bleach the horizon as Nate landed in a stumbling rush near a side door to Arcadeland. The jolt helped rouse him more than the flying had. He wiped sleep from his eyes as he knocked. Chris opened the door. He was dressed in the same clothes as yesterday.

“Hey,” Nate said. “Am I the last to arrive?”

“You could say that,” Chris replied. “Where’d you go last night? Jonas didn’t seem happy that you skipped coming back here.”

“I was freaked out,” Nate said, unsure who else might be listening to his response. “I mean, we almost drowned Roman. I needed some time to get my head right. But now I’m good. I’m ready.”

Nate stepped through the door. Chris leaned close. “Can you believe we’re going after Uweya so soon?”

Nate kept his voice low. “Yep. It leaves nobody time to react. Pretty smart.” Nate stopped whispering. “Did you sleep here?”

“It was late,” Chris said, as if making an excuse for a misdeed. “We were exhausted. Mr. White thought it would be better than to have us go home only to come back so early.”

They were walking toward an EMPLOYEES ONLY door. Cleon stood beside it. He gave a casual, two-fingered salute. He wore tinted sunglasses and had a toothpick between his lips. Nate waved.

“Long night?” Cleon asked.

“Short night,” Nate replied. “I slept like a rock.”

Using a key, Cleon opened the door, then followed them through. He escorted them to the elevator, and from there to Tallah’s door. He knocked.

Nate scanned up and down the hall, searching for signs of a fight. No evidence of the showdown with Victor and Trevor was apparent.

Tallah answered the door. She wore long, beaded earrings and an

embroidered wrap over her purple top. “Welcome,” she said to Nate. “So nice to see you again.”

“Thanks,” Nate said, entering with the others as she stepped aside.

“Hey,” Lindy greeted. “Nice of you to rejoin us.” She sat on a sofa beside Risa.

“I needed alone time,” Nate said. “I was feeling overwhelmed. I had to go crash.”

“Now that you’re all here, we can begin,” Tallah said. “Who would care for oatmeal with cinnamon apples?”

“They’re not here for tainted snacks,” Cleon snapped.

“Mind your tongue, Mr. Cleon,” Tallah chided. “No need for unpleasantness. You kids want to get down to business?”

“Yes, please,” Risa said.

“There we go,” Tallah said. “Ask politely and I’m happy to accommodate. First things first. We need to wash your stamps away. Mr. Jonas insisted that we start from scratch. Hold out your hands.”

Nate extended his stamped hand. Tallah brushed a clear fluid onto the back of his fist. The pungent solution stung a little and felt very cold, as if it were evaporating rapidly. He turned his head away from the smell.

Once they had all been brushed with the solution, Tallah came by with a coarse cloth and scrubbed their hands briskly. Nate studied the back of his hand after she finished. His skin was red and raw. No trace of ink remained.

“You can choose two stamps,” Tallah said. “Jonas urged me to attempt three, but I swore I could make no three of his stamps stable, and he believed me. Good thing, too, else you kids might have suffered damage without remedy. Mr. Jonas informed me that due to the nature of your upcoming task, one stamp must enable you to fly. Each of you is free to choose whichever second stamp you wish.”

“For the record,” Cleon interjected, “you’d be wise to make sure various abilities are represented. This promises to be your toughest assignment yet.”

“I want to be a flying tank,” Chris said. “I’ve always thought that would be the best combo.”

“Fine with me,” Nate said.

“I think a racer jet would be best,” Risa said. “Do you guys mind if I do that?”

“Go for it,” Lindy encouraged. She turned to Cleon. “Think we’ll need to go underwater?”

“Not as far as I know,” Cleon said. “We can’t guarantee anything, but it seems unlikely.”

“Then maybe I’ll be a flying tank also,” Lindy replied.

“What about you, Nate?” Cleon asked.

Nate dug a piece of Peak Performance gum from his pocket. “What about this?” Nate asked, holding the stick of gum out to Tallah. “Could you blend this with two stamps?”

Furrowing her brow, Tallah accepted the gum. She unwrapped it and sniffed it. She tested the corner with her tongue. After scowling thoughtfully, she gave it another tiny lick. Then she passed the gum back to Nate.

“No way could I blend this with two stamps. It is very potent magic, premium work. I could, however, modify the gum so it would harmonize with a single stamp.”

Nate nodded. “Okay. Then I want flight and this gum. I have two other sticks. The effect doesn’t last very long. Could you set up all three to work with a jet stamp?”

“I believe I could,” Tallah said. “You’d want to use the gum one stick at a time, of course. Are we all resolved? Should I get to work?” She looked to Cleon.

“Why the gum, Nate?” Cleon asked. “You sure it beats tank strength and racer speed?”

“I’m not sure,” Nate said. “But you saw it in action in the arcade. We already have a flying racer and two flying tanks. This gives us a different weapon. You suggested variety.”

Cleon shrugged. “Fair enough. It’s your hide. I won’t object.”

Tallah set about her work. She applied dual stamps to Chris, Risa, and Lindy. After some time fussing with Nate’s three sticks of Peak Performance, she mixed a new solution, then applied a jet stamp to Nate and sealed it with her new concoction.

“There we go,” Tallah pronounced. “All four of your little soldiers are geared up as requested.”

“Pleasure as always,” Cleon said.

“If you say so, Mr. Cleon,” Tallah replied. Her expression sobered. “You kids take care what you bring out of the Devil’s Mountain.”

“And you be careful what spews from that mouth of yours,” Cleon cautioned. “Come on, Jets. You have appointments to keep.”

While Tallah looked on, Cleon ushered the kids into the hall. Nate watched Tallah as he walked out. She appeared worried. She looked like she wanted to cry out a warning. But she didn’t, and the door closed.

“Are we out of here?” Chris asked.

“Not so fast,” Cleon said. “Three of you had the opportunity to meet with

Mr. White. But not Nate. The boss wants to have words with him before you all depart.”

“Okay,” Nate said, hoping he sounded casual. “No problem.”

“I’m relieved to have your permission,” Cleon drawled. “Come on, Mr. Gum Jet. The boss is this way.”

Cleon led the four Jets down a hall and around a corner. They found the muscular guy with black spiky hair coming toward them.

“Hey there, Conner,” Cleon said.

“I’ll take Nate from here,” Conner said stonily. “You get the others to the vehicle.”

“Sure thing,” Cleon said. “Come on, you three.”

Cleon did an about-face and led the others back the way they had come. Without acknowledging Nate, Conner reversed his direction as well. Nate followed.

Nate had seen Conner before but had never spoken to him. “You guys have a lovely underground base here,” he tried.

Conner said nothing.

“I love what you’ve done with the concrete. Very parking garage.”

Conner kept strutting down the hall without a backward glance. They passed an intersection. Nate felt tempted to take a side hall, just to make Conner react. But he didn’t want to stir things up too much. If he got dropped from the mission to recover Uweya, his last chance to stop Jonas White would be gone. He had reason to hope he would be included. Tallah had stamped him. They wouldn’t restamp him just to drop him from the mission, right?

“Have you worked here long?” Nate asked.

Again Conner neglected to respond. Nate decided not to press him further.

After more walking, Conner stopped to open a sturdy door. He motioned for Nate to go through, then followed, pushing the door closed.

They had entered a rather bare room divided by a thick, clear wall with small clusters of holes in it. On the far side of the wall, Jonas White sat in a high-backed armchair. Conner took up a position behind Nate.

“Kind of you to join us,” Jonas said silkily. “We missed you last night. You had other engagements, I take it?”

“I was tired,” Nate said. “It was a long day.”

“Too long to join your fellow Jets when they returned the Protector? Too long to confirm your victory?”

“It was already confirmed,” Nate said. “Chris and Risa went ahead with the Protector. We left the Tanks treading water. It was a rough day. People almost died.”

“I noticed that you removed your tracking bracelet,” Jonas said.

“The task was finished,” Nate replied. “It was uncomfortable.”

“I don’t like children, Nate. I never have.”

“I can tell,” Nate said. “Hole eight on your western course is practically impossible. I was putting on it with Chris and Risa the other day, and—”

Jonas held up a weary hand, motioning for him to stop. “Children have underdeveloped judgment. They say foolish things. They do foolish things. They bore me. They disappoint me.”

“If it’s any consolation, I sometimes feel the same way about adults.”

“I expect you do,” Jonas said. He gestured at the clear wall. “Please forgive the inconvenience of this barrier. Recent events have inspired me to take additional precautions. What little faith I had in you is fading.”

“I keep delivering what you want.”

“You have a vital task ahead of you. A hazardous task. Dangerous for you, dangerous for the other Jets. This task means a lot to me, Nate. It means everything. And I don’t trust you.”

“Then why send me?”

“For the assignment to recover the Protector, the Tanks had the advantage. If I were to have gambled on the outcome, I would have bet on them. Given the variables involved, their speed and strength should have outclassed your aeronautic and aquatic abilities. You had the means to raise the trunk from the tower, but they had the means to extract the Protector and keep it from you. I need capable people, Nate, and you have proven yourself the most capable.”

“We almost killed Roman taking the Protector from him,” Nate said. “It was a close one.”

“I may not like children,” Jonas said, “but I can admire ruthless dedication to victory. You will open the way to Uweya for me.”

“Count on it.”

“I know that you are not my ally. But you should be. Do not tangle with a man who has a simulacrum of you. Foolish child or not, you ought to learn that lesson before it is too late.”

“Fighting you would be crazy,” Nate said.

“It would be futile,” Jonas assured him. “The other Jets look to you for leadership. They expect you to join them on this mission. I want you to join them as well. But I want you to understand what will happen should you attempt to cross me.”

“I’m listening.”

“I have simulacra of them, too,” Jonas reminded him. “And you know I currently hold Trevor here, and Pigeon, as well as Victor Battiato, John Dart, and

the illustrious Mozag. Cross me, and they all perish, Nate. I've killed before. I won't hesitate. Are we clear?"

Nate felt stunned by the man's bluntness. He nodded weakly.

"Serve me well and you'll be rewarded," Jonas said. "Do I keep my promises, Conner?"

"Yes, sir."

Jonas gave a sickly smile. "It's important to keep your promises when dealing with mercenaries. My word matters to me for many reasons. For example, I set rules to the contest between the clubs. The Jets won the contest, therefore the Jets will retrieve Uweya."

"Makes sense," Nate said.

"Once I have Uweya," Jonas continued, "you and your friends will no longer be threats to me. Serve me well, and you will all go free. Your families will be spared. Even though you never had my best interests at heart, I'll reward you. Defy me, and it's not just your own life you're gambling with, Nate."

"I get it," Nate said. "I'm not crazy."

Jonas wagged a finger. "Yet children sometimes do crazy things." He waved a dismissive hand. "Very well, Nate. Off you go. Serve me well. Fetch Uweya. Your friends are depending on you."

"I understand."

Conner opened the door.

Nate jerked a thumb at Conner. "In the interest of employee feedback, this guy needs to work on his people skills."

"Conner wasn't hired to do customer service," Jonas said around a smirk.

Nate followed Conner out of the room.

The SUV climbed a steep, rutted dirt road that made Nate cling to the door for support. Cleon drove. A small woman named Jeanine rode shotgun. Seat belts fastened, Nate, Lindy, and Risa sat on the bench behind them. Chris reclined in the far back.

The SUV rocked and reared over the challenging road. A couple of times Nate thought they were going to tip over. In her middle position on the bench, Lindy flopped from one side to the other with all of the jostling.

"Are you sure we're going the right way?" Nate asked.

"Don't tell me you can't handle a little bump or two," Cleon replied.

"What happened to the regular drivers?" Lindy asked. "The guys you used to cart around the other clubs?"

"This mission is too sensitive for anyone but family," Cleon said with a grin.

A particularly strong jolt sent a shockwave through Nate's spine. "We might have a hard time getting Uweya if we're paralyzed," he complained.

"This is nothing," Cleon said. "You're just used to driving like city kids. You need more off-roading in your life. It's good for the soul."

"But not the spine," Nate muttered.

They continued to climb the shoulder of Mt. Diablo. The sun was now well above the horizon. Cleon had said that due to the daylight, he was under orders to escort everyone to their destination instead of letting them fly.

"You guys found a tunnel last night?" Nate asked. Cleon had not yet fully explained.

Cleon yawned, his fillings visible in the rearview mirror. "I deserve a big, fat nap after all of this is done. So does Jeanine. Those in the know have searched for an entrance to Mt. Diablo for years. Several of the mines in the region secretly had that as a goal. But everybody dug too low."

"Are we going to the top?" Lindy wondered.

"Closer to the top than you might have guessed. See, if you drop the Protector, he always falls facing the direction to Uweya. We spent much of the night fumbling in the dark. In the end, we found the entrance."

"Where are the Gate and the Protector now?" Nate asked. "We'll still need them, won't we?"

"They're up ahead, ready and waiting," Cleon said. "We left them there last night. Figured it beat losing them in a hijacking today. Mr. White likes to play it safe."

The SUV continued up the mountainside. From time to time, with a rough shake and the grinding of metal, the SUV would get high centered and become immobile. Cleon would look over at Jeanine, who would close her eyes and make the SUV wobble until the wheels got traction. Nate assumed she must be the Crusher Ziggy had mentioned.

At length they reached a steep, rocky point where the SUV could proceed no farther. Cleon killed the engine and got out of the vehicle. The others climbed out as well.

Cleon stood with his hands on his hips, teeth bared as he glared up the slope. "We're not too far from the entrance. A little hike might do us some good."

Nate levitated a few inches off the ground. "Do *you* some good," he corrected. "Daylight or not, I don't see anyone around, so I'm saving my strength."

"Kid has a point," Jeanine said, her voice a bit huskier than Nate would have predicted. She rose half a foot off the ground. "It'll cost me less exertion to

float there than to walk.”

“How about floating me?” Cleon suggested.

Jeanine arched an eyebrow. “Drop a few pounds and we’ll talk.”

Cleon pressed his lips together, as if biting back a sharp reply. He nodded, rubbed his lips, and started plodding up the long slope. The others hovered around him like a flock of ghosts.

Risa drifted over to Jeanine. “You can fly?”

Jeanine considered her coolly, but answered. “In a sense. I can do tricks with gravity that enable me to float.”

“Why not fly Cleon?” Chris asked. “Is he really too heavy?”

“Messing with gravity takes finesse,” Jeanine said. “I’ve learned to float myself efficiently through lots of practice. Floating others requires more energy and concentration.”

“You were making the car float back there?” Lindy inquired.

“I was shifting gravity enough to let us get traction,” Jeanine explained. “Lifting the entire SUV would wipe me out before long.”

“Do you really want to specify your limits?” Cleon huffed.

“Are you really out of breath already? You need to slow down on the ribs and nachos.”

Nate tried to choke back his laughter. Muffled giggles surrounded him.

“Yuck it up,” Cleon complained. “We’ll see how funny old Cleon is once the trouble starts under the mountain.”

“If we’re attacked by corn dogs,” Jeanine said with a straight face, “our enemies will be doomed.”

As they progressed up the slope, the observation tower atop Mt. Diablo came into view above them. Nate had once enjoyed the view from the solid structure on a day trip with his family. It had never crossed his mind that he might be close to an ancient magical treasure.

Cleon paused, staring up at the observation tower and wiping sweat from his brow. “Folks might be able to see us. You freaks might want to get back down on the ground.”

“That building is still a long ways off,” Jeanine protested. “No way can anyone see the six inches between my toes and the ground. I know misery loves company, Cleon, but we’re going to keep hovering. Pick up the pace if you can. Boss wanted this accomplished today.”

Grumbling angry words under his breath, Cleon sped up a little. He kept his eyes on the ground in front of his feet.

At last they arrived at a dark cleft in the ground sheltered by a boulder. The cavity didn’t look like much of a cave. Nate wouldn’t have expected it to extend

back more than a few feet out of view.

“We had to excavate this,” Cleon said, his lungs working hard. “Jeanine didn’t pitch in. She sat back and watched. Everybody who wants to criticize my hiking should keep in mind that I was up most of the night uncovering this entrance.”

“We’re very proud of you,” Jeanine consoled. “It’s a majestic hole.”

Cleon gestured at the cleft with both hands. “In we go.”

Chris ducked inside.

“Watch out for that first step,” Cleon called, one hand beside his mouth. “It’s a doozy.”

“The kid can fly,” Jeanine pointed out.

“It’s an expression,” Cleon growled.

“Watch your tone,” Jeanine said. “You’ll need my help before long.”

Cleon gave a little nod and tipped an imaginary hat. “No disrespect intended.”

Risa hesitated, crouching at the entrance of the cleft.

Cleon waved for her to enter. “Go on, girl. You’ll be fine.”

“They left light in here,” Chris called from inside. His voice already sounded kind of distant.

Risa entered. Nate followed, squirming through the narrow opening. He wondered how a big guy like Cleon could fit. He probably couldn’t squeeze through without getting scraped up.

The deeper Nate progressed into the cleft, the more it opened up, until he was no longer squirming and could walk comfortably. The air smelled of minerals. Up ahead he saw Chris silhouetted against an electric lantern.

“Come here,” Chris called, waving.

Lifting off the ground, Nate flew along the cave to where Chris stood by the lantern. Nate caught up to Risa, and they reached Chris together.

Where Chris waited beside the lantern, the cave widened considerably, forming a large, craggy chamber. A massive hole dominated the floor. Chris lingered a few paces from the brink of the yawning crater.

“Looks like we go down from here,” Chris said.

“I don’t see any other openings,” Risa agreed.

Nate drifted out over the void. “Hello,” he called, tilted downward, hands cupped around his mouth. The acoustics of the echoes suggested that the hole was extremely deep.

“How can you hover over all that emptiness?” Risa asked with a shiver.

“I don’t know,” Nate replied. “The same way I can swim in deep water, I guess. It’s a long way down, but I can fly.”

“I can’t,” Cleon remarked, striding toward them. “That’s why I need Gravity Girl.”

“And why you had better be nice to her,” Jeanine reminded him.

Lindy glided out over the void to hover beside Nate. “Wow,” she murmured. “Now, *that* is a deep hole. It’s like staring down the throat of a volcano.”

Jeanine cracked a chemical light stick, then shook it until it emitted an even, green radiance. She tossed it underhand into the crater. Nate watched as it fell and fell, shrinking to a faint green spark before vanishing entirely.

“It has a bottom, right?” Nate asked.

“I can’t confirm,” Lindy said. “It extends a long way and then elbows a little to the side. I can’t see through the rocks here.”

“It has a bottom, all right,” Cleon said. “The Gate and the Protector are down there right now.”

“How’d they get down there?” Risa asked.

“We had a busy night,” Jeanine said.

“Are we ready?” Cleon asked.

Jeanine cracked more chemical light sticks, distributing one to each of them. Then Jeanine and Cleon floated out over the pit. Cleon wobbled and waved his arms for balance.

“Keep still,” Jeanine advised. “You’re messing up my concentration.”

Cleon obeyed without comment.

“I’ll lead the way,” Lindy offered.

They started downward. Nate regretted his lack of opportunity to strategize with the others. Somebody employed by Jonas was always present to overhear. He hoped that when the time came, Chris and Risa would help hold back Jeanine and Cleon so he could race ahead to Uweya. He would have to pick his moment with care. If he failed today, Jonas would win.

Nate stole glances at Cleon and Jeanine. If he made it to Uweya ahead of everyone, what would he do? How much time would he have before others caught up? This was not the sort of situation where he wanted to trust to luck and improvisation. But what else could he do, considering how little he really knew about Uweya? What else could he expect, with so little time to collaborate and plan? A nervous, fluttery feeling persisted in his belly.

The air grew cooler as they descended. The gentle glow of their light sticks seemed a feeble weapon against the thick darkness above and below. They didn’t rush—the ominous obscurity around them forbade haste. Nate felt like a deep-sea explorer sinking into an oceanic trench.

The profound shaft elbowed once, then again. After the second bend, the

bottom of the pit came into view, illuminated by various electric lanterns.

“Katie Sung is waiting for us,” Lindy announced.

“Jonas wanted his best people along,” Cleon said.

“Is that why you’re here?” Jeanine said, straining to resist laughter. “Don’t make me crack up, Cleon. I wouldn’t want one of his best people to fall.”

“You calling me minor league?” Cleon challenged.

“We’ll let your performance today do the talking,” she replied. “Now let me concentrate.”

“Welcome,” Katie greeted warmly as Nate touched down between a pair of lanterns. Her form-fitting outfit emphasized her athletic build. Nate noticed the cot where she must have slept. “Turns out the Jets were the top squad after all. A few of us employed by Mr. White lost some money on that outcome.”

“Don’t remind me,” Cleon grumbled.

“You bet against us?” Chris exclaimed.

“Nothing personal,” Cleon said as his feet reached the ground. “I figured that racer plus tank equaled domination.”

“Don’t bet against the delinquents,” Katie said. “Nate and especially Lindy earned their stamps through suspicious means. The kind of person who beats the system once is likely to do so again. I have my eyes on them.”

Nate didn’t miss the message—Katie was there to ensure that Nate and Lindy would perform as expected. When he tried to make his move, she would be there to stop him.

“What now?” Risa asked.

“You’ll see,” Katie promised. “This way.”

They followed her down a passage away from the base of the shaft. The passage opened into a cavernous room, lit by glowing crystals in the walls and ceiling. A colossal stone gate dominated most of one wall.

“It looks exactly like the Gate,” Lindy realized. “The one we took from the Hermit.”

“The Gate is a simulacrum,” Katie said. “As is the Protector. No doubt the Gate will open the way once placed on the pedestal. How the Protector will be employed remains to be seen.”

A pedestal composed of white stone flecked with gold projected up from the floor in the center of the room. The Gate and the Protector rested on the ground near the base of the pedestal.

“We use the little gate to open the big one?” Chris verified.

“Presumably,” Katie said. “Sadly, we don’t know what to expect once the gate opens. Mr. White suspects we will face some stiff opposition. Enough that it could spell the end for all of us.”

“Unacceptable,” Cleon said. “My team’s playing tonight. I have a date with my TV.”

Jeanine elbowed him.

“I brought some weapons,” Katie announced. She motioned toward a large canvas bag. “Take what you want.”

Risa made it to the bag first and pulled open the mouth. “Lots of baseball bats.”

“Bats, hammers, shields, a few axes,” Katie recited. “Mr. White suspects we’ll want blunt instruments.”

“Not for smashing giant Protectors,” Nate hoped.

Katie shrugged. “We’ll know when the gate opens.”

“What about machine guns?” Chris asked. “What about a bazooka?”

Katie scowled. “Mr. White warned that an accomplished mage like Iwa Iza would have installed powerful defenses against magical attacks. Since Iwa Iza lived long before the invention of gunpowder, firearms would probably register as magical attacks and engage those formidable defenses. This place is mage-proof, and consequently gun-proof.”

“But we’re all using magic,” Risa said, confused.

“We’re magically enhanced,” Katie explained. “We’re not wielding magic ourselves. None of us are mages. We’re just employing our enhanced skills.”

“We’re using gifts bestowed by mages,” Jeanine added. “We’re originating nothing. It makes a difference.”

“Go on,” Cleon said, shooing the Jets toward the bag. “Cowboy up. Those who can fly and are bulletproof get to bear the brunt of the attacks.”

The first bat Nate tried felt too heavy. The next was made of wood and seemed about right—light enough to swing fast, but heavy enough to do some damage. He chose a small mallet as a backup weapon.

Nate edged over to Lindy, who was testing the weight of a much larger bat than he had selected. Having a tank stamp had some advantages when it came to strength, although her practice swings lacked expertise.

“You don’t see anything, do you?” Nate checked quietly.

“Not through the rock,” Lindy murmured. “Not through the gate. This place is impermeable.”

“Nice Pigeon word.”

“It means—”

“I get that it means you can’t see through it.”

“We good?” Cleon asked. “All set?” He held a baseball bat over his head with both hands, pivoting at the waist and reaching high to stretch. “Let’s see what lies behind door number one.”

Risa zipped up into the air at an amazing speed. She zoomed to different positions around the room in quick bursts, darting like a dragonfly.

“Flying in race mode is cool,” Risa crowed. “You guys seem so slow.”

“Use the ability to good advantage when the gate opens,” Katie admonished.

“Will we need the Protector when the gate opens?” Nate wondered. “Should we have it ready?”

“I’m not sure,” Katie admitted. “We’ll need it at some point up ahead.”

“I’ll watch over it,” Chris offered. “I can take some punishment.”

“Are you going to chew a Peak Performance?” Lindy asked Nate.

“I’ll wait and see what we’re dealing with,” Nate replied. “I have a limited supply.” He held up the stick of gum in his hand.

“Who wants to do the honors?” Katie asked.

“I’ll open it,” Lindy offered.

Katie gestured for her to go ahead.

Lindy flew over to the pedestal. She picked up the Gate and set it on the pedestal. The Gate took on a faint glow, as if a light source within the stone had been ignited.

Chris took up a position near the little warrior statue. Nate and Risa hovered together. Nate rubbed his stick of Peak Performance with his thumb. He tried to keep calm.

“Open it?” Lindy checked.

“Everyone ready?” Katie asked, looking around.

“I’m past ready and halfway to bored,” Cleon said, taking a practice swing with his bat.

Nobody offered opposition.

“Do it,” Katie said.

Lindy pulled open the miniature gate.

Nate braced for the Gate to start morphing into a bizarre new form. Instead, the gate merely swung open, as did the enormous gate in the wall.

Beyond the open gate, Nate could see another large chamber populated by a horde of figures of varying size. Some were the height of children, some matched up with adults, and a few were larger than man-sized. The figures wore primitive, painted masks of extensive diversity. Some masks represented animals like snakes, wolves, bears, hawks, or seals. Other masks were grotesque caricatures of people. Still others bulged with inexplicable shapes, abstract and unsettling. None of the figures moved. They were composed of a grayish ceramic material.

“Are they made of clay?” Risa asked.

“There are hundreds of them,” Katie observed, her voice hushed.

“Are they just going to stand there?” Cleon asked.

“Maybe they’re out of batteries,” Nate said wishfully.

The remark drew a few uneasy chuckles.

The ceramic host remained stationary.

“They have weapons,” Risa observed.

Most bore simple armaments—stone hammers, wooden clubs, stout rods, crude spears. A few carried primitive bows. Some lacked obvious weapons.

“Are they just for effect?” Chris asked.

“I’m a fairly lucky guy,” Cleon said. “But I can’t believe I’m *that* lucky.”

“Should I fly in there and look around?” Risa asked. “We can’t see the whole room. I could use my fastest speed.”

“If you’re volunteering, I won’t stop you,” Katie said.

“Wait,” Risa hedged. “You think it could be dangerous? Even flying?”

“It shouldn’t be too dangerous if you use your top speed,” Katie replied smoothly. Nate questioned how much she believed her words.

“All right,” Risa said with a trace of hesitation. “I’ll take a peek.”

Quick as a blink, Risa sped away, hardly even visible as a blur. Nate realized that, even under normal conditions, the kids could fly much faster than any person could run. If Risa was going around ten times her normal flight speed, she had to be moving at hundreds of miles per hour.

The instant the half-glimpsed blur of Risa’s speedy form passed through the gate, the ceramic warriors attacked. Brandishing their weapons, the figures sprang into action, flooding through the gate as if their petrified poses had been an elaborate hoax. They raised no voices, but arrows launched into the air, stones were propelled from slings, and countless ceramic feet trampled over the stone floor.

After his initial jolt of surprise, Nate realized that several of the archers were targeting him. Flying higher, he popped the stick of Peak Performance into his mouth and started vigorously chewing.

His perception of the oncoming threat was instantly clarified. His attention first went to the twenty-two warriors within his field of view armed with projectiles. Avoiding arrows and stones would be essential to surviving the battle. But survival alone would not suffice—he had to help the other Jets!

Ranks of soldiers descended on Chris and Lindy. Katie Sung sprang to aid Chris, probably because it would help guard the Protector. She joined the fray with jaw-dropping ferocity, shattering foes with explosive kicks and vicious blows from the pair of mallets she wielded.

Chris had a large bat, and he swung it recklessly. Spears jabbed him, stone

axes chopped him, and clubs slammed against him. The strongest blows made him stumble a little. Otherwise, he absorbed each impact and kept on swinging. Stroke after stroke pulverized warrior after warrior.

Despite the fierce defense from Katie and Chris, the ceramic warriors pressed forward undaunted, showing no regard for their survival. None hesitated. None retreated. Unlike Chris, Katie could not afford to take blows. She danced wildly to avoid endless attacks, retaliating whenever possible. Given the overwhelming quantity of assailants, Nate wondered how long she could last.

Lindy was faring much worse than Chris. She got knocked off her feet, and a gang of ceramic figures surrounded her, issuing blows at will.

Cleon rushed to her aid. His body kept passing through ceramic figures, as if he had no substance. Their weapons swished through him as though he were a hologram.

A few feet to one side of Cleon, ceramic heads were bursting and limbs were getting bashed to pieces in time with his swings. With his heightened senses, Nate quickly recognized that Cleon had somehow projected an image of himself a short distance away from his actual position.

Cleon was making slow progress toward Lindy, so Nate flew to help. Since he was the lone target above the combat, stones and arrows kept streaking his way, but he dodged them with casual effort, twisting and curving to avoid the projectiles. Swooping down, using the speed of his flight to boost the force of his blow, Nate obliterated a ceramic head with his baseball bat. Staying low, bobbing up and down just above the heads of the inhuman soldiers, Nate started thumping them with precise forehands and backhands. Whether time had decayed their ceramic forms and masks, or whether they had never been particularly sturdy to begin with, they crumbled beneath his swings.

A group of ten warriors suddenly rose twenty feet into the air, then fell back to the ground, shattering on impact. Another group of attackers flew skyward, and another.

Nate helped Lindy to her feet while Cleon covered them. "You okay?" Nate asked.

Lindy looked up at him gratefully. "I'm unhurt. A little freaked, though. I wish I had spent more time practicing baseball."

Katie Sung and Chris fell back to them. Katie was breathing hard. Jeanine levitated more groups of warriors and sent them crashing down atop others. No matter how many ceramic figures they incapacitated, more kept streaming through the gate, swarming fearlessly.

"They break easily," Nate commented.

"True," Chris agreed.

“There are too many,” Katie gasped, sweat running down the sides of her face. “Jeanine will get worn down before long. So will I. Fragile or not, they’ll overwhelm us with sheer numbers.”

More soldiers poured into the room, spreading out to approach from all sides. Nate took to the air again, narrowly dodging weapons while issuing perfect blows. Katie fought with manic intensity, moving in measured bursts from one enemy to the next, smashing them to dust with stunning power. Chris fought methodically, absorbing blows so he could focus on offense.

Risa returned abruptly. When she slowed to normal speed, her face was flushed, and she was panting. “There’s an even larger room beyond the gate!” she called. “If you can get through it, there’s a pedestal in there, and a big statue just like the Protector.”

A rock glanced off her arm. Temporarily speeding up, she flew higher.

“Are you all right?” Nate asked, flying up to her. He used his bat to deflect a stone that would have struck her in the back.

“Going at top speed wore me out really quickly,” Risa said. “Much faster than Trevor described. Even after I slowed to race mode, I got so woozy that I almost passed out. Everybody was shooting at me. I got spooked, climbed high, and slowed down. I came back as soon as I felt I could handle race mode again. I still don’t feel great.”

Nate yanked Risa to one side to help her avoid an arrow. “Can you keep flying in race mode?”

“I think so,” Risa said shakily.

“You better try,” Nate said. “If you hold still, they’ll pick you off.”

Down below, the illusionary Cleon flickered, and his actual self came into view. One of his arms hung limp at his side. Blood sheeted from a gash on his forehead. He fought on, one-handed.

Protector in hand, Chris took to the air, racing toward the gate. An arrow hit him, bouncing away harmlessly.

“Nate!” Katie cried from below. “Help guard the Protector!”

Risa started flying around at a higher speed, and Nate zoomed to help Chris. Apparently they were hoping that placing the Protector on the pedestal Risa had found might help the situation. Nate hoped it wouldn’t make everything worse.

The Protector



Chris led the way through the open gate and into the neighboring chamber. The vast room had a high ceiling. A third of the spacious floor remained covered by warriors pressing toward the gate. The pedestal in the center of the room was unguarded.

On the far side of the room, a monumental statue stood against the wall. In form and stance, it matched the Protector perfectly—stocky, thick-limbed, with a large club in each hand.

Chris landed beside the pedestal and slammed the Protector down on top of it. The Protector took on a faint inner glow. Nothing else happened.

Most of the ceramic soldiers continued to surge toward the gate, but those toward the rear turned and headed for Chris. Several archers targeted Nate all at once, forcing him to dive and contort himself to avoid the volley of arrows. Despite his maneuvering, two arrows breezed close enough that he felt the wind of their passage.

In frustration, Chris jostled the Protector, evidently hoping that by shaking it enough he might make something happen. His actions caused one of the Protector's arms to stretch out to one side. The arm of the larger statue extended in precisely the same way.

"Use the statue!" Nate called. "Use the big statue to fight the others!"

Chris tried to pick up the Protector, but failed. Gripping the legs, he made one of them step forward, then the other. The imposing statue took two steps away from the wall. Nate noticed a small door behind where it had stood.

Nate arrived at the pedestal, landing nimbly. "Cover me," Nate blurted. "With the gum I'm better at this."

Chris relinquished the Protector, and Nate began using the small statue to make the large one come bounding to their aid. As the first ceramic warrior reached the pedestal, Chris destroyed it with his bat. Chris waded forward

resolutely. Spear tips snapped against his chest as each swing spewed ceramic chips into the air.

Lindy flew in to lend support. She landed roughly, and although she failed to bash soldiers as efficiently as Chris, she diverted the attention of many.

Nate only needed a few seconds. Under the influence of Peak Performance, he could visualize perfectly how to manipulate the Protector in order to make the big statue move exactly how he wanted.

Chris and Lindy hastily flew out of the way as the big statue stomped forward. A mighty swipe of one club blasted several ceramic warriors into confetti.

Nate swiveled the statue to attack in multiple directions. Swinging liberally, it shattered soldiers in droves. The tallest of the ceramic warriors failed to stand higher than the waist of the stout stone guardian. Weapons struck the massive statue harmlessly, as if the ceramic warriors were attempting to kill a mountain. Unfortunately for them, the mountain was fighting back.

Despite his elation at his success, Nate controlled the gigantic statue calmly. Lindy and Chris dealt with the warriors that slipped by, freeing Nate to concentrate on his demolition work. Risa zoomed by a couple of times in race mode, lending extra assistance.

The ceramic soldiers that had marched into the other room had now reversed their course. Nate made the giant statue plod forward until it stood at the gate to receive them. The ceramic forces advanced recklessly, and the big statue mowed them down until the air filled with dust and the area around the gateway became heaped with rubble.

Toward the end, Nate felt the effects of the Peak Performance dwindling. His hands began to feel a little clumsier, and the ways he needed to manipulate the small statue became less intuitive. But by then, the battle was essentially over. As he swiped at the remaining soldiers with less precise swings, Nate trusted the others to dismantle the stragglers. He decided to save his other two sticks of Peak Performance for whatever dangers might lie ahead.

Led by Katie Sung and Chris, the others pounded the remaining warriors until they lay broken and inert. Nate let go of the Protector and backed away from the pedestal. The huge statue stood motionless once more.

Cleon came limping through the gate, using an ancient spear as a crutch. He seemed to have use of both arms. Dried blood stained his face, neck, and shoulder, but no fresh blood was flowing. Jeanine strolled beside him, apparently unhurt.

“You all right?” Nate called as Cleon approached.

“Mr. White patched me up as best he could using my simulacrum,” Cleon

said. "My leg took an ugly blow. I'm lucky I can walk at all."

Risa leaned against the pedestal. "I'm dizzy and tired," she said, head bowed. "Near the end, I was sure I would pass out."

"What now?" Chris asked. Scars and dents marred his heavy baseball bat. His clothes were punctured and torn.

Katie motioned to the location where the statue had originally stood. Recessed into the wall was a small door, intricately carved with concentric circles and swirling patterns.

"It's for short people," Lindy noted.

"It's too small for the big statue to fit," Nate realized. "Whoever designed this place didn't want us using the Protector beyond this room."

"You're probably right," Katie acknowledged.

"Any idea what comes next?" Chris asked, bat resting on his shoulder.

"My guess?" Cleon said. "Something beyond that door will try to kill us."

"Mind if we rest for a minute?" Risa asked. "The high-speed flying wore me out."

"Take a load off," Katie said. "We can't proceed until we get this next door open." She started toward the door.

Grunting and squatting, Cleon sat down on the floor. Risa sat down as well, leaning her back against the pedestal. Chris and Jeanine followed Katie.

Lindy sidled over to Nate. "No keyhole," she whispered. "No seams. I can't see through it, but I can see into it a little. It's at least three feet thick."

Nate sat down with his legs crossed. Lindy knelt beside him.

Katie stood nearly a head taller than the carved door. She ran her hands over it high and low, tracing some of the curvy lines etched into the surface. She applied pressure in certain places. Finally she backed away, hands on her hips, and asked generally, "Any theories?"

Nobody responded. Jeanine and Chris moved forward to take a closer look.

Katie turned to Nate. "Use the statue to break it down."

"Worth a try," Nate said. The Protector remained on the pedestal. As Nate used the little model to march the statue over to the door, he could feel that his gum had fully worn off. Still, guiding the statue while under the influence of Peak Performance had given him experience, so he managed to jerkily maneuver the statue into position and kick the door. The foot struck with a dull thud. The door showed no sign of weakening.

"Use a club," Katie recommended.

Nate shifted the position of the statue so he could swing a club low. A pair of blows accomplished nothing.

"Hit it hard!" Katie demanded.

Nate shifted the position again and took a big swing. The top half of the club broke off. The door appeared undamaged.

“Perfect,” Cleon spat.

“Contact Jonas,” Jeanine suggested.

Katie produced a small seashell and spoke into it quietly. She held it to her ear as if receiving a response. She spoke and listened several more times.

“Nate,” Katie called. “Remove the Protector from the pedestal.”

When Nate tried to lift the entire Protector, it felt glued to the top of the pedestal, which was strange because he had managed to lift individual legs with little problem. He had more luck as he tried to tip it with both hands. He found that constant effort slowly caused it to lean. As he tipped and lifted, he fought against what felt like a powerful magnetic attraction. With a final yank, the Protector came free. The big statue remained frozen in place. The small, thick door slid upward until it disappeared entirely.

“Bingo!” Cleon chuckled. “Boss knows his stuff.”

Katie murmured something into the seashell. She listened, nodded, then put it away. “Is everyone recuperated?”

Cleon used the spear to help himself rise. “I’m about as ready to die as I’ll ever be.”

The others got up as well. They gathered near the small doorway. Peering inside, Nate saw a long, narrow corridor.

“A Tank should lead the way,” Katie prompted.

“Out of the road,” Chris said, stepping through the doorway. “You guys back me up.”

Nate got another stick of gum ready. He dreaded to think what might await beyond the confining hallway. Lindy followed Chris, Nate tailed Lindy, and Katie entered behind Nate. The hall was no higher than the doorway. Chris was almost tall enough for the top of his head to brush the ceiling. Katie had to advance in a stooped position.

“I don’t see any enemies,” Lindy told Nate. “But the way ahead won’t be easy.”

Nate saw what she meant when he exited the cramped corridor. The hall opened into yet another large chamber. To the right, an enormous corridor led away from the cavernous room. The massive corridor was essentially a bigger, longer hallway full of moving obstacles like the passage that had guarded the Protector. Beyond the spinning blades, scything pendulums, jabbing spikes, twirling axes, and crushing pillars, Nate caught fleeting glimpses of a large, distant door.

“No way,” Chris said. “This is worse than Angel Island.”

“Much worse,” Lindy agreed. “It’s denser—more blades, bigger blades, more spikes. Many are faster than anything we saw in the other corridor. Some of the pillars are mashing together horizontally. I see evidence of trapdoors in the floor. Some of the holes in the wall have arrows and darts ready to fire. Plus it’s more than twice as long.”

Behind them, Nate noticed Katie speaking into the seashell. She regarded the frantic obstacle course with trepidation.

Risa approached the other Jets. “This isn’t fair! Is every hidden treasure guarded by a hall like this?”

“Iwa Iza hid the Protector,” Nate reminded her. “He also hid Uweya. Same designer.”

Risa shook her head in despair. “Do we seriously have to—”

Her words cut off without explanation. Nate looked over and saw that Risa was holding perfectly still. Chris was motionless as well. And Lindy. He decided he had better freeze himself.

“Please don’t panic,” Katie said. “Jonas has temporarily immobilized the four of you for security reasons. He expected something like this final gauntlet. Our prize should lie just beyond. We needed you against those warriors, and we thank you for your fine service. The good news is, you won’t have to make it through that deadly tangle up ahead. Jonas will use my simulacrum to boost me as he has never boosted anyone before, and the task of retrieving Uweya will be mine alone.”

“I’ve never heard them so quiet,” Cleon said.

“Can’t they speak?” Jeanine asked.

“Jonas wanted to paralyze you four quickly,” Katie explained. “As a consequence, he had no time for finesse. He’ll go back and make you a little more comfortable if you behave well. Free up your mouths and eyes, for example. Then, once Uweya is secure, he’ll release you entirely, and you can fly out of here, free to enjoy the fruit of your efforts.”

Nate remained motionless, although keeping completely still was turning out to be harder than he might have guessed. He was worried that he might sway a little, or move his arm, or shift his glance, or somehow give away the fact that he

remained in complete control of his body. The other Jets remained as immobile as wax figures.

Nate was positioned so he could see Katie. Her brow crinkled, and she lifted the seashell to her ear. Her alarmed eyes went to Nate. “Is somebody playing possum?”

The moment had arrived. It was now or never. The other Jets were out of

commission. He knew where he needed to go. The amulet around his neck had obviously worked, preventing Jonas from freezing him, and now Jonas had noticed that something was interfering with his simulcry.

Nate still had the stick of Peak Performance in his hand. Shoving the gum into his mouth, he took to the air, rising quickly. Cleon, Jeanine, and Katie all shouted in dismay. Katie hurled her mallets at him with superhuman force, but the gum was already kicking in, and Nate narrowly dodged them. Gravity suddenly increased around him, dragging him down, but Nate found that if he angled down diagonally, he could slip away from the weighty pull. Each time he escaped, a moment later gravity would increase again as Jeanine refocused her power. But every time he slipped away from her increased gravity field, he climbed as much as possible before the downward tug hit him again. Overall, he kept gaining altitude instead of losing. After her seventh attempt to drag him down, Jeanine collapsed.

Nate took that opportunity as his cue and arrowed toward the deadly hall. He could fly, and his senses and coordination were enhanced, but his body was as vulnerable as ever. One wrong move and he would get shredded to ribbons. Even fully under the influence of Peak Performance, navigating the lethal hallway looked virtually impossible. He could see a way in, but even with his senses enhanced, Nate could not chart a complete route through from his current vantage. He hoped that he would somehow find ways to keep moving forward, yard by yard, foot by foot, without getting decapitated, flattened, or impaled. Gritting his teeth, he prayed that he and Peak Performance would be up to the challenge.

Nate entered the hall near the upper left corner. All of his senses were focused on survival. He tried not to get overwhelmed by the abundant lethal threats. He attempted to focus on the most immediate dangers, on how to survive one second to the next while still advancing. There was no time to plan, only to react. With desperate faith, he entrusted his life to his enhanced reflexes.

A huge blade swished by close enough that the metallic smell registered distinctly. Nate curved his body to avoid a thrusting spear, then ducked to barely dodge a pair of axes. He began to spin wildly, eyes roving, because it was the only way to see everything around him and avoid getting blindsided. He not only looked but listened.

Peak Performance offered no sense of security—even with the enhancement, he was stretched to his limits. Too much was coming at him too fast. He flew in strange new ways. Sometimes he flew feet first. Sometimes he flew spread-eagle. Sometimes he would drop or rise suddenly. He flew tucked into a tiny ball, he flew with his body ramrod straight, he flew in bizarre poses to

dodge simultaneous slashes and stabs.

Nate didn't think about reaching the end of the obstacles. There was no opportunity to examine how far he had come or how much farther he had to go. He only had time to twirl and tuck, to climb and fall, to flip and swoop and twist.

He made dozens of split-second decisions. He chose to let a blade graze his back to avoid having an arrow plunge through his neck. He permitted a spear to nick his thigh to keep a speeding column from crushing his arm. When two ways to proceed presented themselves, he tried to estimate which was the lesser evil. There was no time to choose well.

Flying had never felt so exhausting. Nothing had ever felt so exhausting. He scantily avoided death over and over and over and over. How many near misses could a person survive? How many scrapes and scratches could one accept to avoid getting maimed or worse? There was no place to pause, no chance to regroup, only a host of fatal threats, followed by another barrage, and then another.

When he emerged from the far side of the obstacle course, it came as a shock. Nate flew to the ground and spread out his arms to embrace the floor. He had never felt so happy to be at rest. Little cuts and scrapes stung all over his body. He was truly stunned to be alive. Somewhere deep down, he had known that eventually he would reach a place where no amount of clever contortion would avoid a certain combination of threats. And that would have been the end.

Except he had survived. Would he have to fly back through the obstacles after reaching Uweya? Probably. He didn't want to think about that yet. For now, the frenetic corridor separated him from his enemies. Maybe not for long, though. Katie would be coming after him. How long would it take for Jonas to empower her? Even with additional enhancements, would she be able to navigate the lethal corridor? He had to assume she would survive. He had to keep moving.

Instead of standing up, Nate flew to the door. It was more than three times his height. A metallic lever to one side of the doorway seemed the obvious way to open it. Nate pulled the lever. The door opened.

Uweya



Nate decided to walk through the doorway rather than fly. A short hall led into a circular room with a high, domed ceiling. The shape made Nate think of an observatory he had once visited. Thanks to his enhanced state, he took in many details, but his attention was not drawn to the tightly fitted stone blocks of the walls or ceiling, or the worktables positioned around the room, or the stacks of supplies against some of the walls. He found himself entranced by the familiar sphere floating in the center of the room.

Nate had seen globes, and he had seen pictures of Earth from space, so it was easy to recognize that the ball hovering above the floor was his home planet, rendered in breathtaking detail. From his present vantage, he could see most of the Atlantic Ocean, along with much of North and South America and part of Europe and Africa.

At least twelve feet in diameter, the sphere hung inexplicably suspended, slightly tilted on an invisible axis. Even from a distance, mountains stood out in clear relief, islands poked up out of the sea, and icecaps covered the poles. The color was so true to life that Nate imagined he could splash his hand in the ocean. Unlike with photos from space, no clouds obscured his view of the planet.

Fortunately Nate was still chewing his gum, which allowed him to dodge the two arrows that hissed toward him. Although the attack surprised him, after the obstacles in the corridor, the effort to evade the arrows felt minimal.

“What was that?” Nate complained loudly, now flying again. He swiftly gained altitude.

A young man and a young woman emerged from hiding, each armed with a bow, each nocking another arrow. They both appeared to be Native American, and they wore modern clothes. “You don’t belong here!” the young man called.

“So you’re just going to shoot me?” Nate asked incredulously.

They both fired again. Nate avoided the arrows.

“Wait!” Nate cried, fishing out the keychain William had given him. “I have permission to be here!”

They paused in the act of setting new arrows to their bowstrings.

“Where’d you get that?” the young woman accused.

“William Graywater gave it to me,” Nate explained. “I’m here to protect Uweya. William told me I have to use Uweya to keep Jonas White from stealing it. There are others right behind me who work for him.”

The young man set his bow aside. “Come here so I can have a closer look.”

Keeping hold of her bow, the young woman shook her head. “It’s a trick.”

“I wasn’t expecting to find people here,” Nate said, unsure whether it was safe to approach.

“Yeah, well, surprise,” the young woman said, aiming her bow at him.

The young man laid a hand on her shoulder. “Celia, nobody outside our family knew about the token. Uncle William must have really given it to him.”

Celia gave a little nod and lowered the bow. “Others are coming?”

“No joke,” Nate said. “A ComKin, meaning a Combat Kinetic. A tough magical mercenary. Jonas is boosting her power using a simulacrum.”

“This could be the opportunity we wanted,” the young man said.

Nodding, Celia set her bow aside. Nate swooped down to them.

“I’m Ted Graywater,” the young man said. “This is my sister Celia.”

“Nate.”

Ted held out his hand. “Mind if I see the token?”

Nate handed it over.

Celia touched Nate’s arm. “You’re bleeding.”

“Just scratches. Could have been much worse.”

“This wasn’t taken by force,” Ted said. “William trusts you.”

“How did you make it through that hallway?” Celia asked.

“I have an enhancer that boosts my reflexes,” Nate replied. “I was going to ask you two the same thing.”

“We didn’t come through the hallway,” Ted said. “We had a unique gateway that led right to this room. It was fairly small and made of crystal. We kept it in our trailer. When our trailer was attacked by super-powered kids, Celia and I went through the gateway. Things must have gone badly, because Grandma destroyed it behind us.”

“We’re trapped here now,” Celia said.

“It was an emergency tactic,” Ted said.

“You could come here whenever you wanted?” Nate asked.

“It was the fate of the Graywater family,” Celia said. “We guard Uweya. We

care for it. But if any of us touches any part of it, we all die.”

“For generations we had a private way in and out of here,” Ted said. “Right up until Grandma blasted it with her shotgun.”

Nate nodded at the huge globe. “Is that Uweya?”

“You got it on your first guess,” Ted said. “It’s kind of hard to miss. It’s a simulacrum of the whole planet.”

“*Uweya* means ‘Second Earth,’” Celia supplied.

Nate regarded the globe with new respect. “You mean, if I do something to the simulacrum, it happens to Earth.”

Ted nodded solemnly. “You could flatten a mountain with your thumb, cause a tsunami with a flick of your wrist, or bash a country into oblivion with your fist.”

Nate swallowed. His throat felt dry. “Are you serious?”

“I’m as serious as a nuclear holocaust,” Ted said. “Serious as the sun going supernova. Serious as the end of the world.”

“The simulacrum has no real atmosphere,” Celia explained. “Wind and clouds aren’t depicted. There are no satellites or moon or sun or stars. No living matter is represented, either. No living people, animals, insects, or plants. Once something dies, it’s a different story. Dead trees are there, pressed flowers, fallen leaves, fingernail clippings, stuffed hunting trophies, bodies in coffins in the cemeteries. All nonliving matter is represented. This includes buildings, bridges, ships, planes, motorcycles, televisions—everything. It all moves around just how it is currently moving on the planet. Empty cars driving down congested freeways. Empty submarines patrolling below the surface of the ocean. It’s miraculous.”

“How can I use it to stop Jonas White?”

Ted shrugged. “It would be hard to stop him directly. In theory, you could find his clothes walking around and knock a building onto him. Clothes are visible. Hair isn’t until it gets cut free from the body. But it would be almost impossible to single out a person from outside of Uweya.”

“So what can I do?” Nate asked.

“William gave you the token,” Celia said. “It probably means he thinks you’re the one who should destroy Uweya.”

“Destroy Uweya?” Nate exclaimed. “Won’t that destroy the world?”

“Not if you do it the proper way,” Ted said. “Not if you enter Uweya.”

“What do you mean?” Nate asked, glancing over at the entrance to the room. Katie could barge in at any moment.

Celia rushed over to a workbench and returned with a stone coin. It had a hole in the center and fine markings on both sides. “You can use a coin like this

one to enter Uweya. You look at the surface of Uweya through the hole in the coin, speak the command, and then you shrink down and are transported to the spot you were examining. You can then interact with Uweya as if you were a person standing on the Earth.”

“Weird,” Nate said.

“The nonliving material of Uweya differs from Earth in one vital way,” Ted said. “If, while on Uweya, you journey to the location of Uweya, instead of finding another Uweya, you will find the power source that keeps Uweya active. Throw your coin into the power source, and you will terminate the connection between Uweya and Earth.”

“Uweya becomes a regular globe,” Nate said.

“Essentially,” Celia agreed.

“What happens to me?” Nate asked.

Ted and Celia shared a glance. “The coin gets you in and out of Uweya,” Celia said. “You look through the coin, aim it at the sky, speak the command, and you will exit Uweya. You can use the coin as many times as you want, but a person can only bring a single coin into Uweya.”

Nate frowned. “If I destroy the power source while I’m still on Uweya, won’t that leave me stranded there?”

“Destroying the power source will almost certainly destroy Uweya as well,” Ted said. “You might get ejected from Uweya when you do it. Then again, maybe not. Depends how Iwa Iza set it up.”

“You can’t take matter from Uweya,” Celia said. “Nor can you add foreign material to Uweya—it can only visit. You can only bring out what you bring in, and nothing you bring in becomes truly part of the simulacrum. That might mean that if Uweya ends, you would be expelled.”

“Or it could be a suicide mission,” Nate said.

“Possibly,” Ted said. “We have no way of knowing for sure.”

“Why can’t I bring two coins?” Nate asked. “If I have to use a coin to destroy the power source, I’d feel better if I had an extra to at least attempt an escape.”

“Only the coin you’re looking through will come with you,” Celia explained. “Any others you try to bring will be left behind.”

“You should be able to use one of the coins you find there,” Ted said. “There will be simulcratic versions of the coins in this room inside of Uweya. Just use one of the simulcratic coins to destroy the power source.”

“That should work,” Celia agreed.

“If it doesn’t work?” Nate asked.

“Then you’ll have to use the coin you brought with you,” Ted said.

“And if I don’t automatically get kicked out of Uweya?”

Ted and Celia shared a glance. “You’ll probably die,” Celia said.

Nate folded his arms and stared at the floor. Were there any alternatives? What if Katie got killed when she tried to get through the hallway? Jonas would just send somebody else. He would get somebody here eventually.

“You guys have known how to destroy Uweya all along?” Nate asked.

“Our family has known since the duty was entrusted to us,” Ted said.

“The Graywaters have guarded Uweya for many centuries,” Celia added.

“Then why didn’t you end it forever ago?” Nate wondered.

“Think about it,” Celia said. “We Graywaters can’t touch Uweya. We can’t use the coins. If we so much as poke Uweya with a stick from across the room, we all drop dead.”

“We knew how to unmake it,” Ted said. “We even had access. But we needed to find somebody we trusted completely—somebody we knew would destroy Uweya instead of abuse it. Think about the temptation! Anyone who controlled Uweya would literally control the world! In the end, generation after generation, we concluded it was safer simply to keep it secret.”

“But now the secret is out,” Nate said.

“Exactly,” Ted said. “If this weren’t an emergency, I can’t imagine William would have bestowed the token upon you. But apparently he thought his chances were better with you than with Jonas White. What do you say?”

Nate’s stomach felt knotted. His perspiration felt cold. “I’m not super eager to die.”

“If Uweya falls into the wrong hands, we all die,” Celia pointed out.

“You could theoretically survive destroying it,” Ted encouraged.

Nate nodded neutrally. Was there another option? There had to be! But what? “Give me a minute to think.”

Ted glanced at the doorway. “What are the chances this ComKin can make it through the hallway?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Nate replied. “It’s so brutal. But Jonas seems to have planned for everything. It’s definitely possible.”

They all stared at the doorway in silence.

“I’ll go have a look,” Celia offered.

Nobody tried to dissuade her.

Nate looked at Ted. “So I’ll have to go into Uweya, then go through that hall again to get to the power source?”

“It’s the only remaining way to access this room,” Ted said.

Nate still had one stick of Peak Performance. The thought of flying through the hall again was not exciting. “Will I still be able to fly if I enter Uweya?”

“Your magic should work the same,” Ted said.

“Will I be able to breathe? You mentioned there’s no wind. Is there air?”

“I’m not sure exactly how it works,” Ted confessed. “Maybe you breathe the same air you’re breathing now. Maybe there is a special layer of breathable air around Uweya. All I know is that in the distant past, Iwa Iza and his apprentices entered Uweya, and they didn’t die.”

“She’s coming,” Celia called from the door. “She’s more than halfway through.”

Ted stared at Nate expectantly.

“All right,” Nate said. “Let’s get ready. If she makes it through, I’ll go in.”

Ted hurried over to a workbench and returned with a coin. He gave it to Nate.

“How many coins are there?” Nate wondered.

“Dozens,” Ted said. “Were you hoping to hide them to keep her from following you?”

“It had crossed my mind.”

“There’s too many,” Ted said. “I don’t know where we could stash them. Hopefully she doesn’t know about the coins. We’ll try to stop her.”

“Don’t try too hard,” Nate said. “If she makes it through that hallway, you won’t stand a chance. I’ve seen her fight. She probably knows about the coins. Jonas seemed to know everything about this place.”

“We’ll do our best to delay her,” Ted vowed. “It’s our sworn duty.”

“I’d appreciate that. What now?”

“Normally you would lie on a levitating tablet to get into position,” Ted said. “We have many of them. But you can fly, so you can probably get into position easier yourself. Be careful. Accidentally bumping Uweya with your elbow could kill millions. Look through the coin, then say ‘utcha.’ You’ll enter Uweya where you’re looking when you speak. Point the coin skyward and say ‘utcha’ to get out.”

“Utcha?”

“Utcha.”

“Will people be able to see me?” Nate asked.

“The people of Earth? No. You’ll see their clothes and their cars, things like that, but they won’t see you or anything you bring. Nor will they be able to touch you. Not directly. But all of the nonliving components of Uweya can interact with you. If a car runs you down, you’ll feel it.”

“It’ll kill me?”

“Just like a normal car. Take care.”

“She’s almost here!” Celia cried. “She’s unstoppable!” Celia heaved the

door closed.

“Thanks,” Nate said. “Good luck.”

“Save all your luck for yourself,” Ted said. “Take mine too!”

Nate glided over to Uweya. He approached slowly. It was easy to find the California coastline, easy to find the distinctive inlet of the San Francisco Bay. The Peak Performance remained active in his system, keeping his senses keen.

Holding the coin to his eye, Nate found that with a small effort, he could zoom his vision in closer to the surface, as if the coin were a magical telescope. He zoomed in and out at will, marveling at the details. There was San Francisco. There was the Golden Gate Bridge. He could see the vehicles crossing it. He found vessels in the bay.

Nate could not help thinking how much Pigeon would have enjoyed all the detail. Pigeon loved maps and geography, and this put every map in existence to shame. But if Nate accomplished his goal, Pigeon would never get a chance to see it.

There was Alcatraz. There was Yerba Buena Island.

Nate zoomed out. He needed to find Mt. Diablo.

But wait.

If he went to Mt. Diablo and destroyed Uweya’s power source, Jonas White would still be holding his friends prisoner. Jonas would still have simulacra of Pigeon, Trevor, Summer, Lindy, and the others. If Nate took out Uweya, Jonas could retaliate by killing most of the people he cared about. Unless he went after another power source first.

The door opened. Nate saw that Celia and Ted had taken up hidden positions. Nate peered through the coin. With Peak Performance still augmenting his senses, locating Arcadeland was no big trick.

“Utcha,” he said softly.

Nate felt like he was getting turned inside out. His head seemed to retract down into his belly, and his legs seemed to withdraw up into his head. Quickly, painlessly, he collapsed down to a single point.

When he expanded back to his regular size, Nate was standing on a curb, part of the way down the block from Arcadeland. He felt proud that he had landed so close to his destination. The buildings looked how they should, and the street, and the cars. But the planter boxes were empty except for dirt and some snarled, dead vegetable matter. A closer look revealed that the cars were empty as well. A combination of denim shorts, a T-shirt, a baseball hat, a wristwatch, sneakers, and socks strolled along the sidewalk, holding a leash attached to an empty collar, as though both dog and owner were invisible.

The sky was the oddest part. Instead of clouds, or a sun, or blueness, or

starry black, the sky looked like part of the domed chamber that housed Uweya. Nate was not staring up from the Earth toward the immensity of space. He was staring up from a large globe in a well-lit room.

Nate slipped the stone coin into his pocket. He was relieved to find that he really could still fly. He soared over to Arcadeland, alighting near the front doors. A few sets of clothes pushed the doors open from inside, then walked toward the parking lot.

Nate pulled a door open. It felt no different from interacting with a normal door. He walked into the arcade.

Clothes stood playing arcade games. Clothes manned the food counter. Clothes threw basketballs for points. Clothes aimed the guns at the shooting gallery. The scene was very eerie, as if everyone in the world had obliviously become invisible.

Nate watched a set of clothes at a table lift a hamburger. A bite of the hamburger disappeared. The food was not visible as it was chewed or swallowed. Once ingested, it vanished.

Nate took out the simple map Ziggy had drawn. He studied it for a moment, comparing it to his surroundings, then flew to the appropriate EMPLOYEES ONLY door. He found it locked.

Of course it was locked! Now what?

Nate looked around for something he might use to break it down. Then again, maybe there was a subtler way. After all, nobody could see him.

He knocked softly. He knocked harder. Then he knocked really hard. He started beating the door with both hands. He kicked it with the sole of his shoe, making it shudder.

A set of clothes came hustling over. Nate scooted out of the way. A key came out and was inserted into the lock, and the door opened. Obviously the employee thought that somebody was stuck on the far side. Nate recognized that just as he could see no people, he could also hear no voices. He wondered if the employee was speaking, perhaps calling to the person who had battered the door. The set of clothes passed through the door, checking down the hallway beyond.

Nate used the opportunity to slip through the doorway, flying over the clothes of the employee. Leaving the clothes behind, Nate soared down the hall. He could feel the effects of Peak Performance wearing thin. He would have to be careful with his last stick. It was his only hope of making it through the obstacle course within Mt. Diablo.

Keeping an eye on his map, Nate found his way to the stairway door. Again, it was locked. Nate tried the same routine. He knocked softly at first, then harder, then he pounded it relentlessly.

This time a set of clothes opened the door from the far side. Nate recognized the clothes from that morning. It was Conner! That made sense. Conner had probably been posted to watch the stairway. When he heard the commotion, he had come to investigate.

Straightening his body, Nate flew over Conner through the top of the doorway. Conner passed beyond the doorway, turning to look up and down the hall. Then he hurried back through the door, shut it, and locked it. He rushed down the stairs. Nate followed.

Conner used a key on the door at the bottom of the stairs. Nate wondered whether they had kept all of these doors locked before last night's intrusion. When Conner opened the door, Nate darted through the top of it.

Below him, Conner paused, apparently conversing with another person. Nate didn't recognize the second person's clothes. After a moment, Conner started down the hall, striding briskly. He was going the same direction Nate wanted to travel.

Nate felt an excited flutter of hope. He had considered trying to blindside Conner with a heavy object in order to take his keycard to Jonas White's sanctum. But what if Conner was voluntarily heading to the sanctum to report the strange disturbance? Nate kept checking his map as Conner kept making the correct turns.

Sure enough, Nate found himself drifting above and behind Conner as he made his way down the hall toward a sturdy metal door. The metal door matched up with the location of the sanctum on the graph-paper map.

"Keep going, you brainless gorilla," Nate mouthed, not daring to speak the words even though he felt sure Conner wouldn't be able to hear them.

Conner paused at the door, looking back down the hall as his wallet came out of his back pocket. A plastic card was removed. Conner swiped the card, then tugged the heavy door open.

Just as Nate was about to slip over Conner and into the sanctum, he heard footfalls from behind. The rhythm was strange. Although each step sounded abnormally loud, there was too much time between them.

Swiveling in the air, Nate saw Katie come tearing around the corner at the end of the hall. Her eyes locked on Nate as she came bounding forward, devouring nearly twenty feet per stride. Her normally immaculate hair was disheveled, with part of it slashed away parallel to a clotted gash along her cheek. Scratches crisscrossed her face, the tip of her nose was gone, and it looked like wild animals had savaged her bodysuit. Her left arm was missing at the elbow. Despite her many injuries, no fresh blood flowed.

Apparently responding to a signal from within the sanctum, Conner moved

to close the door. Nate knifed through just before it slammed shut.

Conner had shut himself and Katie out of the sanctum. For the moment, Nate was alone with a crowd of wax figures and a fancy black robe with gold embroidery that could only belong to Jonas White. The black robe stood near the wax figure of Katie Sung. The wax figure had injuries to match Katie's, including the scratches on her face and the missing forearm. Needles of varying size protruded all over the wax figure, and Jonas continued to insert more.

Nate saw the jade urn in the recess on the far side of the room. It was the only object that fit the description. He flew to the recessed shelf, grabbed the top of the vase, and yanked.

It didn't budge.

Behind Nate, the door to the sanctum opened. Katie sprang through before Conner heaved it closed. Although she had entered, he remained outside. Evidently Conner realized he was defending Jonas from invisible intruders, but he didn't understand that they kept slipping by him. Nate wondered how much Katie had communicated to Jonas via seashell.

Instead of yanking, Nate gave the urn a steady pull and felt it begin to tip. It was apparently held in place similarly to how the Protector had been anchored to its pedestal, as if by unseen magnets.

With a shrieking battle cry, Katie came flying at Nate, one foot outstretched. Nate had to soar away or she would have demolished him. Her foot hit the wall instead of his head. She landed nimbly. The urn remained upright.

Nate flew away from her as she gave pursuit. Katie leapt around the room almost as if she could fly as well. Nate made no effort to engage her. He had seen how hard she could kick and punch. One blow might be all she needed to finish him.

He tried to swerve back toward the urn, but she knew what he wanted and kept cutting him off. Gradually she herded Nate toward a corner.

Jonas toddled away from Katie's wax figure toward the figure of Nate. A knife emerged from his robe.

Nate realized that if things didn't change quickly, Katie would corner him and take him down. He crammed his final stick of Peak Performance into his mouth.

Jonas stabbed the figure of Nate in the back of the head. Slashing the throat, he removed the wax head from the body. Nate winced but felt no effect from the attack.

As the Peak Performance entered his system, Nate saw the room more clearly. He knew what he had to do.

Nate flew back into the wall as if he didn't know it was there. With triumph

in her damaged features, Katie sprang at him, her foot snapping forward with a vicious kick. But Nate anticipated the move based on the pattern of her offense and swooped under her attack, his nose inches from the floor.

If he went for the urn, Nate knew Katie would get to him before he could overturn it. So instead he flew at her wax figure. First he kicked the figure in the stomach with everything he had. The wax figure toppled.

Behind him, Katie collapsed, vomiting violently.

Nate crouched and began stripping away the acupuncture needles all over the wax figure. Behind him, Katie went into wild convulsions.

Nate noticed the robe making its way toward the wax representation of Mozag, knife upraised. Again, Nate doubted whether he could tip the urn in time. Instead he flew to the robe, grabbed the back of it, and jerked it hard. Jonas had always appeared unsteady. Sure enough, the robe fell to the ground and the knife skidded free. The sleeves of the robe reached toward one of the invisible legs, as if grasping an injury.

Nate flew to the urn. Bracing a foot against the wall, he seized the top with both hands and pulled steadily. The urn tipped a little at first. As Nate kept straining, and the urn tipped more, it began to lean easier. The urn came free, and Nate carried it away from the niche.

Raising the urn over his head, Nate crashed it down to the tile floor with all of his might. It burst into countless fragments, great and small. For an instant the light in the room dimmed and an indefinable energy throbbed through Nate, making him a little queasy. Then the moment passed, and all seemed as it had before.

Nate took no time to celebrate. He was chewing his last stick of gum, and he had a simulacrum to destroy. First he took out his stone coin, looked through it, aimed it upward, and said, "Utcha."

Nothing happened.

Apparently he needed to actually be looking at the sky.

Nate flew to where Katie lay inert. Noticing a telltale bulge in a zippered pocket on her side, he removed a keycard and a small set of keys. Nate flew to the sanctum door, swiped the card, and shoved it open.

Conner's clothes waited outside. Nate flew down the hall faster than he would have dared without Peak Performance. He swooped around corners and sped down halls until he reached the staircase door. He unlocked it with the second key he tried, sailed up the stairs, then unlocked the door at the top with the same key. Nate flew to an EMPLOYEES ONLY door that he remembered led outside, unlocked it, and flew out.

Flying to Mt. Diablo from here would consume too much valuable time.

Removing the coin from his pocket, Nate peered through it, looked up, and said, “Utcha.”

Nate shrank down to a point and unfolded hovering above Uweya. Without pausing, without looking at his surroundings, Nate peered through the coin, found Mt. Diablo, zoomed in close, found the SUV abandoned on the slope, then traced the path they had taken up the slope to the cavity they had entered. Enhanced as he was by Peak Performance, the task felt simple.

“Utcha,” Nate said again.

He folded into himself and was suddenly standing on the slope not far from the little opening. Nate flew to the entrance and slithered through. He soared through the cave at a high speed. He snatched the electric lantern near the lip of the crater and dove into the enormous hole. Earlier he had descended slowly. Now he rocketed straight down, faster than he would have fallen had he simply jumped off the edge. The speed was essential. If his Peak Performance ran out before he reached the deadly obstacle course, he would get mutilated.

Nate slowed so he could make the turns where the shaft elbowed, then raced to the room with the Gate, through the next room, through the cramped hallway, and into the chamber that led to the obstacle course. He noticed the clothes of Lindy, Chris, and Risa flying around. Destroying Jonas White’s Source had freed them. He also noticed the clothes belonging to Cleon and Jeanine.

The Peak Performance still felt fully operational. Nate paused for a moment in front of the churning corridor of blades, spears, and columns. He had been in such a hurry to get here that he hadn’t stopped to consider whether he still needed to be here.

Did he still need to destroy Uweya?

Jonas White was in trouble. All of his simulacra were now useless. Some of his top people were down for the count. Jonas was probably not in a position to come get Uweya at this point.

But what if Jonas escaped? He knew where to look now. It would only be a matter of time before he tried again.

Even if Jonas was captured, how many of his people knew about Uweya? The secret was out. The way was now open. If Nate left Uweya unguarded, somebody would come and claim it.

As much as he hated the thought of passing through the deadly corridor again, he could not leave a voodoo Earth lying around for any wacko to come and claim. The Hermit and the Graywaters had been right—Uweya was too powerful to entrust to anyone. For the safety of the whole planet, Uweya had to be destroyed.

Nate knew he couldn't wait. If his Peak Performance started to wear off, he would never survive the obstacles ahead. So he zoomed forward.

Dodging through the brutal obstacles was no easier the second time. Nate took a similar route as he had the first time, with many minor variations. Once again, he progressed gradually, his body spinning and flipping into strange positions to avoid the endless dangers. He received nicks and scratches and plenty of close shaves, but he emerged alive at the other end.

This time the door beyond the obstacles was already open. Nate flew into the domed chamber. He saw the clothes belonging to Ted and Celia in motion, and felt relieved to see that Katie hadn't incapacitated them.

A large sphere hung in the center of the room, roughly twelve feet in diameter. Unlike the appearance of Uweya in the real world, this Uweya glowed brightly, its vivid surface an ever-changing palette of swirling color. Amid the dynamic hues, the forms of the oceans and continents remained visible, although the shapes undulated and blurred as diverse colors migrated across the globe.

Nate flew over to the worktable where Ted had gotten him a coin. Several coins lay in plain view, and he claimed one. It seemed identical to the coin in his pocket. Flying close to the brilliant sphere, Nate held the coin in his palm. When he threw in the coin, would Uweya be destroyed instantly? Or might he have a chance to try to fly out and look at the sky using the coin in his pocket?

Iwa Iza was supposed to be an amazing magician. Nate hoped he wouldn't have designed Uweya so that whoever unmade it would be killed.

Bracing himself, Nate searched for the courage to proceed. Throwing the coin might be the last thing he ever did. But it would make his family safe from the threat of Uweya. His friends would also be safer. In thousands of years, nobody had been in a position to remove this danger from the world. Even though he might die, he had to take the chance. He focused on the hope that he would live.

Nate flipped the simulcratic coin with his thumb toward the glowing sphere. After spinning through the air, it disappeared inside the globe. For a moment the sphere swelled and became blinding, then Nate experienced a sensation as if he and everything around him were being drawn into the globe and imploding down to a singularity. As he shrank, an instinctive terror of death rose within him. This could be it. There might not even be a body left to recover.

When Nate expanded out of that point where all of Uweya had united, he found himself back in the room with Ted and Celia. They stood gaping at him. Looking up, Nate saw that he was sitting below where Uweya had previously hovered. Except Uweya was gone. Dust swirled in the air and was spread on the

floor. Glancing over his shoulder, Nate saw Katie Sung lying motionless.

“You did it,” Celia gasped, her gaze fixed on him.

“It’s gone,” Ted said, astonished. “You survived.”

The ground rumbled threateningly.

“Guys?” Nate asked.

A second rumbling was accompanied by some heavy quaking. A few blocks fell from the ceiling, streaming trails of dust.

“This place is old,” Celia said. “It might not hold together without the power source.”

“It might be deliberately rigged to fall apart without the power source,” Ted added.

“Time to go?” Nate asked.

A stronger quake hit. Ted and Celia were already running for the door. Nate glanced at Katie. She had fought against him, but he couldn’t just leave her to die. He went to her and slapped her cheek. Her eyelids twitched. He slapped her harder. “Get up!”

Katie groaned.

Nate shook her shoulder. “Get up or you’re dead!”

Her eyes opened. “You?” Katie asked, disoriented.

“I trashed Jonas White’s power source and also demolished Uweya,” Nate explained hastily. “This place is coming down.”

The strongest, longest quake yet made Nate fly into the air to avoid the shaking. Stone blocks and dirt cascaded from the ceiling, some landing nearby. Fragments skittered across the vibrating floor.

Katie sat up, eyes closed, legs crossed, her remaining hand in her lap. She breathed deeply, as if meditating. Her posture became more erect.

Nate realized she must be trying to recharge her batteries. “We need to hurry,” he said.

There was a lull in the shaking. “You go,” she said. “I’ll be along.”

Nate zoomed for the doorway. He could feel his Peak Performance wearing off. The obstacles in the corridor beyond the doorway no longer functioned. The blades had stopped swiping, the spikes had stopped stabbing, and the pendulums no longer scythed back and forth. Nate caught up with Ted and Celia as they made their way through the stalled traps.

Chris and Lindy came flying toward them. Their appearance surprised Nate—he had assumed they would already be headed for the exit.

“Nate!” Chris called. “You’re alive!”

“We have to get out of here!” Nate yelled. “I wrecked Uweya! This place is falling apart!”

Another round of heavy quaking added emphasis to his warning. One of the heavy pendulums dropped to the floor, leaned into the wall, and came to rest against several inert blades.

“Who are you with?” Chris asked as he reached Nate.

“Ted and Celia Graywater,” Nate said. “They’re on our side.”

“Lindy, get the girl,” Chris ordered. “Nate, help me with the guy.”

Nate was surprised to see Lindy scoop Celia into her arms and fly off down the corridor with only a little extra difficulty. Celia was fairly short and slender, but it was still impressive.

“As flying tanks you can handle more weight?” Nate asked.

“Quite a bit more,” Chris said. “But I may need help with the guy.”

Nate grabbed one of Ted’s legs. Chris grabbed the rest of him. Nate wasn’t sure how much he was helping, since Chris bore most of the weight, but together they shuttled Ted from the corridor.

Looking back, Nate saw Katie rushing through the corridor. Occasionally she would make a larger leap than seemed possible, but she was far from using the impressive bounding stride he had witnessed in Arcadeland on Uweya. Judging by her pained expression, her current effort was requiring all of her energy and concentration.

The quaking was getting more severe, and the pauses were becoming less frequent. Risa flew to greet Nate and Chris in the room beyond the cluttered corridor.

“Where’s Jeanine?” Nate asked.

“She ran back toward the entrance with Cleon,” Risa said.

“Stop her,” Nate said to Chris. “We’ll need her help to get everyone out.”

“I’m on it,” Chris said, setting Ted down. Extending a fist, Chris shot ahead.

Lindy put Celia down as well.

“Come on,” Nate urged. “You can run. The ground is smoother from here on out. This way.”

Nate led the way at a pace that allowed the others to keep up. In the next room, Nate noticed the Protector back on the pedestal. He suspected that Jeanine and Cleon had probably tried to seal them in. Fortunately, without Uweya functioning, the Protector was no longer operational.

They hurried through the gate and into the next room. Glancing back, Nate saw Katie trip on her way through the gate. She didn’t get up.

The quaking worsened. Nate kept his eyes up to avoid falling blocks and stones. Here and there, boulder-sized chunks of stonework crashed down to the floor.

“Lindy,” Nate shouted, flying back toward Katie.

Lindy grabbed one arm, and Nate seized what remained of the other. Katie was a fairly large woman. Carrying her between them, they soon found they could make better time if they let her legs drag.

Stone thundered down around them. The floor began to fracture dramatically. Gritty dust filled the air. Nate narrowly avoided a falling chunk of masonry the size of a microwave oven.

When they reached the enormous shaft, Chris awaited them with Jeanine and Cleon. Jeanine looked disgruntled. Cleon looked pale and exhausted.

“Get us out of here,” Nate shouted over the seismic commotion.

“Too many people,” Jeanine replied loudly. “I can’t raise so many. I’m almost out of juice.”

“We’ll help,” Nate said. “Just make them lighter.”

Jeanine shrugged. “I’ll try.”

“Try now!” Chris yelled angrily.

Chris grabbed Ted, Lindy took Cleon, Risa claimed Celia, and Nate kept hold of Katie. Jeanine began to rise, and Katie became much lighter. Nate found that he could fly with her, although it wasn’t easy.

“Stay near me!” Jeanine shouted. “That will help!”

Crowding close, they rose together. They passed the two bends. The rumbling began to recede. The shaft trembled, but not so violently as down below.

The higher they went, the heavier Katie seemed. With the top in sight, Nate could no longer make progress. He barely managed to hover. He exerted himself with everything he had, but instead of rising, he started to sink. He had draped Katie over his shoulder, so he wasn’t losing hold of her, but he lacked the power to fly her any higher.

“A little help?” Nate asked.

“I’m giving it all I’ve got,” Jeanine growled through clenched teeth.

Chris came down. Ted was riding him piggyback. Chris grabbed Nate’s hand, and together they managed to haul Katie beyond the top of the shaft. As soon as they touched down, Jeanine slumped to the ground, and Nate felt Katie’s full weight. He set her down as gently as he could. Which wasn’t very gently.

The rumbling was now distant. This part of the cave seemed to be in no danger of collapse.

“Let’s get outside,” Nate said. “You know, just in case.”

Jeanine got to her feet, Chris carried Katie, and the group made their way out through the cave mouth. Nate felt relieved to see the blue sky and to breathe air that didn’t smell of dust and minerals.

“I thought I was a goner,” Cleon said. “You kids are all right.”

“You did it, Nate,” Lindy said. “I can hardly believe it.”

“We’re not finished yet,” Nate said. “We have to make sure Trevor, Pigeon, and the others at Arcadeland are all right. Jonas can’t use his simulacra anymore, but I’m sure he has other powers. And he has henchmen. I don’t care if people see me flying, I’m going straight there.”

“We’re with you,” Chris said.

“Lead the way,” Risa seconded.

“Go on,” Ted said. “We can’t fly.”

Nate looked at Cleon and Jeanine. “You guys will play nice?”

“I’m spent,” Jeanine said wearily.

Cleon scrunched his face. “Jonas blew it, man. This is over.”

Nate glanced at the other Jets. “Over or not, we can’t trust them. Any volunteers to stay and keep an eye on things?”

Lindy looked worried by the prospect.

“Chris?” Nate asked. “Would you mind?”

“Go on,” Chris said, waving Nate away. “I’ve got this.”

“Great.” Nate turned to Risa and Lindy. “Follow me.”

Mopping Up



Pigeon sat with his back to the wall, gently tapping his head against the concrete. He tried not to envision the hot buttered popcorn that had been available whenever he wanted during his stay in Mozag's cell. He tried not to dwell on his failure to knock the urn off the shelf. If only he had been a little faster!

His stomach grumbled. It had been a long while since they had fed him. Had they forgotten about him? What if Jonas White had already gotten Uweya? What if the evil mage and his underlings had simply abandoned Arcadeland? Pigeon stroked his stomach. What if he and his friends were doomed to slowly starve in their cells?

The lock jiggled. Pigeon sat up straight. Was it mealtime? At least that would help take the edge off his misery.

The door opened. Mozag entered, wearing his Cubs hat.

"Mozag!" Pigeon exclaimed, standing up.

One of the Battiatos loomed behind him, looking beefy as a bull. A glance at the neck told Pigeon that it was Ziggy.

"Pigeon, good to see you!" Mozag said. "Your friends came through. Jonas White has been neutralized. I paid him a visit to be sure. Some of his people haven't gotten the memo yet, but this affair is basically over. Want to help us get out of here? Ziggy brought some treats."

"What do you have?" Pigeon asked.

"Let's see," Ziggy said. "I have a biscuit that would make you a shark. Or Shock Bits. Or Moon Rocks. Or Peak—"

"I'll do Shock Bits," Pigeon said. "They're good in close quarters. Do you have lots?"

"Plenty," Ziggy said, handing over the candy.

Pigeon followed them out into the hall. Trevor came up to Pigeon. He was the same color and texture as the concrete floors and walls—his face, his hair, even his clothes.

“What happened to you?” Pigeon exclaimed.

“Tallah gave me a couple of sweets she cooked up,” Trevor explained. “Camouflage Caramels and Spider Bites.”

“I guess the caramels make you like a chameleon,” Pigeon said.

“And the Spider Bites let me climb walls and spit webs,” Trevor said. “They make my throat feel kind of phlegmy, though.”

Ziggy and Mozag unlocked a neighboring door. Ziggy went in. When he came out, he had shrunk back to his regular size and was accompanied by his twin brother.

“Where’s John?” Pigeon asked.

“He went ahead with Tallah to clear the way,” Mozag said. “I almost feel bad for any hirelings who resist. It has been a long while since I’ve seen John in a mood like this.”

“Should we blow this joint?” Victor asked.

Mozag gave a nod. “It’s time.”

When Nate reached Arcadeland, the first person he noticed was Summer flying above one of the miniature golf courses. Nate glided over to her, and she paused in midair to greet him.

“You’re here!” he exclaimed. “You’re flying!”

Summer grinned. “Tallah escaped with jet and racer stamps. She’s double stamping anybody who shows interest. She’s over by the Eiffel Tower.”

“How are Pigeon, Trevor, and everyone?”

“All free. Mozag, John, Victor, Roman, the Tanks, the Racers, the Subs.”

“What about Jonas?”

“Mozag took care of him,” Summer said. “We’re just finishing up with his employees.”

“And the regular customers?”

“Most of them have been blinded by the cheese. I guess alarms were going off, and people assumed it meant a fire. There are some folks out front in the parking lot. Otherwise we’re all clear.” Summer looked past Nate to Lindy and Risa. “Where’s Chris?”

“He’s making sure the bad guys at Mt. Diablo don’t cause any more trouble,” Nate said.

“I see my dad,” Lindy said.

Nate looked to where an ice cream truck had rammed through one of the

side fences. It currently sat idle near the Taj Mahal hole on the miniature golf course. Mr. Stott was behind the wheel.

“Go,” Summer said. “He’s been worried.”

Lindy sped off in that direction.

Nate turned to Risa. “Can you help Summer? I’m out of Peak Performance, so I might as well go add a racer stamp.”

“Go for it,” Risa said.

Summer nodded toward the ice cream truck. “Mr. Stott insisted on coming. He seemed especially anxious about Lindy.”

Nate watched as Lindy reached the ice cream truck. She flew inside, and Mr. Stott clasped her to him. The old mage’s eyes were closed as he held her. Even at a distance Nate could read the relief in his expression.

“I guess I should go get that stamp,” Nate said.

“There may not be much else to do,” Summer said. “This is over.”

Nate smiled. “Then I’ll get it for fun.”

Breakfast for Dinner



Later that evening, everyone gathered at the Sweet Tooth Ice Cream and Candy Shoppe. With the store closed, they had pushed the furniture together to form a single massive table where they could all sit and converse. Nate sat toward the center of the long table. Summer, Pigeon, Trevor, and Lindy occupied seats nearby. Chris and Risa had joined the meal as well. They had tried to talk Roman into coming, but he had chosen to sulk instead. The Battiatos were present, as was John Dart. Ted and Celia Graywater had agreed to attend, and although William had declined his invitation, he sent along his gratitude to Nate.

Mr. Stott and Mozag had spent all afternoon whipping up food for the meal. Nate could hardly believe the variety of treats—banana pancakes, caramel waffles, ebleskivers, toasted bagels, English muffins, omelets, scrambled eggs, hash browns, bacon, sausage, fruit smoothies, hot chocolate, milk, juice, various syrups and preserves, margarine, butter, honey, dulce de leche, and fresh whipped cream all vied for attention.

Standing at the head of the table, Mr. Stott tapped a fork against a glass to summon attention. “I’d like to welcome everyone out to our impromptu victory feast.”

The statement drew a noisy cheer.

Mr. Stott held up his hands. “When a crisis is averted, it is indeed cause for celebration. I’m profoundly impressed with your efforts to keep our world safe. I believe Mozag would like to share some words with you.” Motioning to Mozag, Mr. Stott sat down.

Mozag stood. He wore his Cubs hat and munched on a fat, crisp strip of bacon. “I have been a mage for a very long time. Only an extremely large birthday cake would accommodate the necessary candles. On occasion, I have been asked the secret of my success. My automatic reply is, ‘Surround yourself with good people.’” He gestured around the room. “Tonight I am surrounded by

good people. Thank you for rescuing me, and thank you for protecting all of humanity from Jonas White.”

They all applauded enthusiastically.

“I’m grateful to Sebastian Stott for hosting this gathering,” Mozag continued. “He is not only a fine mage but also a fine cook. Tonight we will feast as the kings of old could only have dreamed, although I’m a little disappointed that some of you neglected to take me up on my more exotic offerings.”

“We want it all,” Victor said. “The stuffed figs taste amazing. The huevos rancheros look perfect.”

“I can’t wait for the Salmon Benedict,” Ziggy said.

“I found some truly fine smoked salmon,” Mozag confided.

“With you as our employer, we would work for food,” Victor gushed.

“It was a rough week, but after tonight we’ll call it even,” Ziggy enthused.

Mozag gave them a grateful nod. “Always helps to bring your own cheering section. In all seriousness, the people at this table, especially the children, went above and beyond to keep our world safe from harm. You all deserve my protection, my gratitude, and my goodwill. Call upon me for favors and you will not be refused. But one of you deserves special recognition. Would Nathan Sutter please come forward?”

Nate looked up and down the table. He hadn’t expected this. “Everyone helped,” he said. “Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon all took huge risks. Chris, Risa, and Lindy came with me after Uweya.”

“And they all have my thanks,” Mozag said. “Particularly Lindy, who handled the revelation about her past with grace and maturity. Like some of the best people I employ, she understands that she need not be defined by her past. We are who we choose to become.”

Lindy wore a faltering smile. Nate felt bad for her. She had been quieter than usual since they had left Arcadeland. Right now it looked like she wished she could crawl under the table and hide.

Mozag was still talking. “Many contributed in valuable ways, but I’ve pieced together all you did, Nate, and it merits extra recognition. Come stand beside me.”

“Get up there,” John Dart ordered.

Feeling self-conscious, Nate pushed his chair back and walked over to Mozag. The old magician shook his hand. “Nate not only destroyed Jonas White’s Source, making our revolt possible, but he also dismantled the most powerful simulacrum on the planet, which happened to be a simulacrum of the planet. We owe Nate our lives, and the world owes Nate for salvation from a long-buried threat.”

Everyone applauded.

Nate wasn't sure how to react. He smiled and gave a little wave.

Mozag cleared his throat before continuing. He held up a gold medal with a black ribbon. The Battiato brothers gasped in unison. John Dart leaned forward with a small smile and a twinkle in his eyes. "In recognition of your extraordinary courage in protecting the world from the forces of magic, I induct you into the Order of the Unseen and offer you our highest commendation, the Medal of Valor."

"Impossible," Mr. Stott murmured.

Victor and Ziggy looked thunderstruck.

Mozag patted Nate on the arm. "The Medal of Valor can only be awarded after a unanimous vote by the Unseen Magi. It has been awarded a mere three other times in the past hundred years. The existence of Uweya has long troubled the Magi, and this medal is a token of their sincerest gratitude." Mozag pinned it on Nate, muttering strange words as he did so. "In the magical community, you now have friends in very high places."

As everyone clapped again, Nate returned to his seat, trying not to blush. His friends patted him on the back and crowded around to see his medal.

Mozag held up both hands. "With that bit of ceremony behind us, I would also like to mention that you're all free to sleep well tonight and for many nights to come. Some of your loved ones will experience withdrawals from the cheese Jonas shared, but they will be back to their old ways before long. Jonas White and all of his major apprentices and assistants have been taken into custody. Thanks to Ziggy Battiato's communication skills, I now have several of my other operatives in town. While they deal with unpleasant matters such as holding areas, trials, and sentencing, we get to feast! Dig in!"

Before long, Nate had too much syrup on his hands, so he got up to use the restroom. While he washed off the stickiness, he admired his medal in the mirror. On the way out, Mr. Stott was standing there.

"A word, Nate?" he asked.

"Sure," Nate said, pausing as he wiped his damp palms against his shirt.

"I need to ask a favor."

"Anything."

"Keep an eye on Lindy for me over the coming days."

"No problem."

Mr. Stott looked a little uncomfortable. "Mozag has expressed some concerns. She reacted admirably when confronted with her true identity, but Mozag fears this may not be the kind of matter that can be resolved in a moment, and I tend to agree. Lindy will be dealing with that knowledge during the

coming days, weeks, months, and even years. She'll probably be coping with it to some degree for the rest of her life. I just want to make sure she gets the support she needs."

"I'll do everything I can," Nate promised.

"Mozag shared one other unsettling tidbit," Mr. Stott said, stroking his beard. "There is a third White sibling—Camilla, the youngest, and undoubtedly the wildest. He's had her under surveillance. She recently left her lair in Brazil to visit a lair in Italy, and then went on to a lair in Portugal. Could mean nothing. But Mozag promised to pay special attention to Camilla and to keep me posted."

"Thanks for telling me," Nate said. "I'll watch for anything suspicious."

"I'll keep you informed as I learn more," Mr. Stott said. "I wish I could promise that your troubles are over forever, but I've been around a long time. Not as long as Mozag, but long enough to know that once you get involved in the magical community, it's hard to break away completely."

"I don't want to break away," Nate said.

"Nor do I," Mr. Stott said, "which is probably part of the problem. You did well, Nate. You're an outstanding young man. Keep your wits about you and you'll go far. Shall we return to the feast?"

"Definitely."

Nate soon got lost in the joyful atmosphere and the delicious food. In between chatting and joking, he managed to eat until he felt ready to burst. When the meal finally ended, full and happy, he reflected on the power of good food and good company to wash away trauma and injuries, and even wondered whether there might have been a touch of magic involved.

Note on Locations



I used to live in the San Francisco area. Many of the locations in this book are real, including Yerba Buena Island, Angel Island, and Mt. Diablo. From fourth to seventh grade, I lived in Clayton, California, not far from Walnut Creek. In the Candy Shop War books, Colson is a modified version of Clayton, and Walnut Hills is a fictionalized mix of Walnut Creek and Concord. Many details are not accurate, but some features are probably recognizable. The destroyer where the Hermit lived was inspired by the reserve fleet of mothballed ships in Suisun Bay, although the USS *Striker* was not deliberately based on an actual vessel.

Arcadeland is not based on any single arcade. I visited several different arcades in Utah and Arizona to do research (I know, my life is hard) and incorporated elements from many of the places I visited along with some details that came entirely from my imagination.

Acknowledgments



I wrote this book because people asked for it. To be more specific, lots of kids (and adults) who had read *Candy Shop War* kept expressing interest in a sequel. When I wrote *Candy Shop War*, I expected it to be a single novel. But as people kept requesting more, my wheels started turning, and I found an idea that I liked. I'm glad readers asked, because I feel good about how the book turned out, and I'm excited to share it with them.

I had a good time dreaming up another adventure for Nate, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon, along with their new pal Lindy and some of their grown-up friends. I expect I'll deliver another adventure before too much time goes by.

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I'd like to give a special nod to my cousin Mike Walton. As kids, we used to play that he tasted what I ate and I tasted what he ate, which helped me come up with the magical side of the Battiato brothers.

I also have to thank my wife, Mary. She not only helps edit all of my books, she also keeps me on task when deadlines get tight. Deadlines were super tight on this project, but Mary helped me make time to get it done. I should thank my kids as well, for being patient with their busy, daydreamy dad. I love you guys!

Finally, thanks to you, my reader. Just as a heads-up: I will be starting a

couple of new series before long. I have not yet written some of my favorite ideas. If you ever want to see the latest books I have coming, go to brandonmull.com, “like” my Facebook page, or follow me on Twitter: [@brandonmull](https://twitter.com/brandonmull).

Reading Guide

1. At the start of the story, Mr. Stott had hidden the fact that John was in trouble, and he hadn't told the kids about the trouble brewing in Walnut Hills. Why do you think he withheld that information? Do you think it was a good choice? Explain.

2. Nate, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon chose to get involved with Arcadeland even though they knew it might be dangerous. Would you take a risk like that to help a friend? Why or why not?

3. As the story went on, the kids did some things they might not have normally done in order to remain undercover working for Jonas White. Why do you think they did those things? What alternatives did they have?

4. Jonas White claimed not to mind that Nate had helped take down his sister. Were you convinced? Why do you think Jonas was willing to let Nate and his friends work for him even though he didn't really trust them? How did this hurt him in the end?

5. Belinda White had been an enemy to Nate, Trevor, Summer, and Pigeon, but after her identity was wiped and she became a kid, they turned into friends. Do you think you could become friends with a former enemy under those circumstances? Why or why not?

6. Mr. Stott and the Blue Falcons kept Lindy's true identity from her. Do you think they were right to withhold that information from her? What would you have done if you were making that choice?

7. Diego and Pigeon wondered whether Belinda had originally become evil due to her nature or because of her upbringing. What do you think?

8. When talking about Lindy, Mozag said, "We are who we choose to become." Does that statement seem true to you? Why or why not?

9. If you could have any stamp from this book, which would you choose? Why? If you could blend any two stamps, which would you choose? Why? If you could blend any two candies or stamps from this series, which would you choose? Why?

10. Uweya was an amazingly powerful simulacrum. How could it be used to do good? How could it be used to cause harm? If you had access to Uweya, would you use it or destroy it? Why?

11. If you could create magical stamps, what new stamps would you invent, and what powers would they have?

12. Which of Jonas White's helpers would you least want as an enemy? Why?

13. Who would you rather have on your side—John Dart, Mozag, Mr. Stott, or the Battiatos? Explain why. Who would you most want as a friend—Nate, Trevor, Summer, Pigeon, Chris, Risa, Roman, or Lindy? Explain.

14. Do you have a favorite arcade that you visit? What is your favorite game to play in an arcade? What is your favorite video game to play at home? Describe a video game or arcade game that you wish existed.

The Candy Shop War card game

THE CANDY SHOP WAR Card Game

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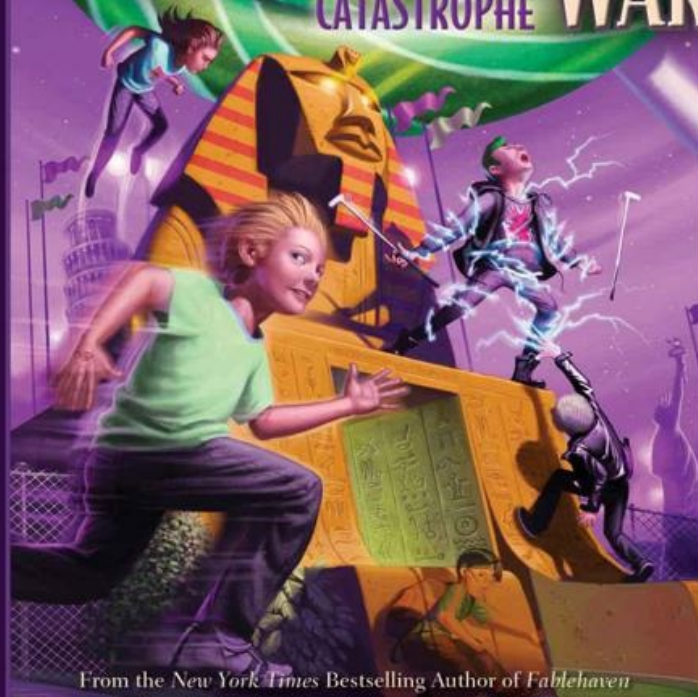
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